

The Epistle of James

Lesson # 4 The Source of Sin James 1:9-16 Date: July 27, 2014

"Webster defines a paradox as "a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true." An example of this is this statement, "giving is receiving." The Scriptures contain many paradoxes, telling us that the weak are strong, the empty are full, the slave is free, the cursed are blessed, and that death brings life – all statements which first strike the ear as contradictory, but become increasingly true to us as we meditate on them....Paradox is a powerful vehicle for truth, because it makes people think."ⁱ

I. The Lowly Brother

James 1:9a

First of all, who are these lowly brothers James refers to? In the context of chapter 1, these must be Jewish converts to Christ who were in poor economic circumstances, most likely as a result of their faith in Christ. Just because of human nature – and we are all aware of this – they were looked down upon as a result of their poverty. This disdain can be subtle, as it is even in our own times. Think of your reaction to when you travel to a large city, like Toronto, and see people living on a sidewalk, surrounded by their 'possessions', dressed in sodden clothing, unwashed and grungy. What's the first thought that crosses your mind...honestly? Is it not, "lazy", "drunkard", "anti-social", "loser"? We are even afraid to give them a few dollars in case they use it to buy drugs or alcohol. We hope we don't encounter the circumstances that led to their humiliation and end up on the street ourselves, and likely 99.9% of us won't if all continues as it is today. But what if there's widespread economic collapse? By the grace of God we have what we have and are who we are.

But James had a far different message for those brothers and sisters who were poor economically. "*Let the lowly brother boast in his humiliation.*" Now that is counter-intuitive isn't it? What is his exaltation? I believe James here refers to perhaps 3 aspects of the Christian life that can be brought to bear on physical poverty. **First**, if you are a believer you are a child of God & a joint-heir with Christ (Rom. 8:17a) of all God has prepared for us in heaven. As an adopted child of God with full rights, then you are part of a royal priesthood and a holy nation (I Pet. 2:9), and you have the hope of glory in you, having been reconciled to God in Christ. Your worst life problem was your sin that separated you from God & His wrath upon you as a result, but that has been dealt with, and if you grasp that great, gracious hope and recognise the temporal nature of a trial such as poverty, then you rejoice (II Cor. 4:16-18).

Discussion question: How do we learn to rejoice – or even be content - in any circumstance, as Paul describes his own condition in Phil. 4:11?

Second, like Paul, as he expresses in Phil. 4:10-13 – you can learn to rejoice in any physical circumstance – poverty or wealth – as long as you trust that God is sovereign and has allowed you to be or decreed you to be in these circumstances. Paul's comment in Phil. 1:12-14 is written from prison, not likely in a state of plenty, yet he sees imprisonment as God's will and as a direct result of his circumstance, the gospel has

been advanced even among the Imperial Guard of Caesar, and his servants. Furthermore, other brothers seeing how Paul is dealing with prison are being emboldened to “*speak the word without fear.*”

Our circumstances are not what matter most. Rather, our reaction to our circumstances is what matters most to God and becomes our testimony of the greatness of our God. Note I Pet. 4:12-6,19. In fact, v. 19 is the key verse in Peter’s first letter.

Third, although James is surely referring to physical poverty here in v. 9, the Bible says much about physical & spiritual poverty. Note verses like LK 4:18-19 (which is Jesus quoting Isa. 61:1-2). The gospel is preached/brought by Christ to the poor (v. 18a), the captives (v. 18b), the blind (v. 18c), and the oppressed (18d); and the coming of Christ is proof of the ‘year of God’s favour’ (or grace). Take note that the gospel is sent to people on the lower fringes of any society and that no mention is made here of the rich, the political or religious elite. In fact, read the part of Isa. 61:2-3 where Jesus closed the Isaiah scroll. More comfort for the mourners but also the ‘day of vengeance of our God’. Poverty for the believer is temporary, even if it’s lifelong, because eternal life is just that, eternal. What’s 50 or 60 or 90 years out of infinity?

Do you see Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3 - loosely from Isa. 66:2)? Being poor in spirit is not the same as being poor economically, but there can often be a connection because physical poverty or physical ailments do cause one to be humble and to seek out God. People in humble circumstances are more prone to consider where their help may arise and they often know where it will not (cf. LK. 16:19ff – Lazarus & the rich man). I Cor. 1:26-31 sheds some light on the reason those who are poor as believers have cause to exult in their situation and to glorify God in it. (James 2:5)

Later on in this letter, James points out that those of lowly circumstances in the church should be treated differently from those outside the church – see James 1:26-27; 2:1-6, 8-9,14-17.

II. The Rich Brother vv. 9b-11

As v. 9 continues on, the sentence structure implies this, “Let the rich brother boast in his humiliation”. This has James seeing the poor brothers as having a spiritual advantage, but he sees the rich in a different light.

Being people who live out our lives in a society that is richer than virtually any society in history, we tend to be shielded from the biblical view of those with great wealth. Being rich is not a sin – many Bible characters who are seen as righteous believers were rich – Job, Abraham, David, Solomon, Nicodemus, Joseph of Aramathea, etc. Yet, you may have noticed in the NT especially the prevalence of verses which show the rich as having a disadvantage when it comes to salvation. For instance, MK 10:17,22-25; MT 13:22; 6:24; I Tim. 6:6-10,17-19; Rev. 3:15-19.

The danger of having wealth when it comes to both seeing the need to be saved and to being faithful once saved is more than subtle. It often means that one begins to trust in their wealth for their future rather than God who (most will not admit) gave them the wealth in the first place. “The entire NT, as well as what we see in people’s lives, suggests that riches are a potential danger to spiritual life.”ⁱⁱ

“Lee Atwater was, the campaign manager for George Bush in the 1988 US Presidential campaign, was a great success by the standards of the world. But after he was diagnosed with brain cancer, he began to reflect on his life in terms that spoke of his desire to have eschewed the wisdom of the world.

The 80’s were about acquiring – wealth, power, prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth power & prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty. What power wouldn’t I trade for a little more time with my family? What price wouldn’t I pay for an evening with my friends? It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with that truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions and moral decay, can learn on my dime. I don’t know who will lead us through the 90’s, but they must be made to speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor of the soul.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet, in James 1:9, the implication is that this rich person is also a brother in Christ, otherwise, why “boast in his humiliation?” So that, just like the poor brother is to recognise the eternal nature of salvation in order to rightly respond to his circumstances, the rich brother is also bidden to contemplate eternity and in fact, vv.10-11 confirm this. James appeals to Isa. 40:6-8 & 22-24,31 to support what he says. The bridge word to this OT illustration by James is in v. 10, “because”. Why should the rich boast in his humiliation? Because, although he is physically and economically ‘above’ his peers, that is temporary, and he must focus on that & use the wealth God has entrusted him with to make a difference in the lives of those who have not been so blessed in this life. This life is not forever – at death we will go one of only 2 places, and this life is where we prepare for which of them we will inhabit. And we cannot take it with you, but as a believer, Revelation 14:13 does apply.

Rev. 3:14-19 is an eye opening passage because this is referring to people in a church, who have physical riches, and Christ for them is on the fringe; they think they don’t really need Him so they are content to live lives that mimic the world, except they attend church. Christ calls them lukewarm and this is said as a condemnation of them. What is the implication for so many (maybe the majority) lukewarm “Christians” in the modern church?

Discussion question: What do you think makes a person a “lukewarm” believer? And is such a person really a believer at all?

Kent Hughes quotes John Wesley on the subject of the brevity of this life versus what awaits the faithful in eternity; “I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit, coming from God, and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf; a few months hence I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing – the way to heaven...”^{iv}

One thing James seems to be striving for in these verses is a sense of community, that biblical hallmark of the church^v that we are to love one another regardless of race,

gender, Christian maturity, handicaps, economic position, etc. cf. I JN 3:16-18 – Being rich can be of great value to others if the rich Christian understands where his wealth comes from. He will use that wealth to make the lives of his brethren better. [Eph. 4:28b; Acts 2:44-47]

In Matt. 25:31-40, we see as Jesus judges the survivors of the Tribulation [prior to establishment of the Millennial Kingdom] that the basis for who will and will not (MT. 25:35-36) enter the Kingdom is based on their goodness to others during a time when goodness to others could be deadly. On the basis of what Revelation describes the Tribulation to be, those who do these deeds will in many cases be those who began the Tribulation with greater wealth than others & shared it, whereas the other side of the coin – vv. 41-46 – those who had wealth and kept it all for their own selfish needs, thus exhibiting poverty of spirit – boasting in their own ability to survive rather than risking survival to help someone else live, will not be in the Kingdom, but will spend eternity in Hell.

James's point then, in vv. 9-11, is that, whatever physical circumstances you are in, make your life a testimony of the goodness and love of God. Glorify Him so you can say with Paul, from Phil. 4:10-13. The two descriptions James describes here – poor or rich – can be trials for a believer, and need to be overcome in order to follow Christ faithfully.

III. The Crown of Life

v. 12

This verse seems to indicate that even in vv. 9-11, James has kept his focus from v. 2 on “*trials of various kinds*”, because in v. 12, the blessed man is one who “*remains steadfast under trial*”, for “when he has stood the test”, then he will receive the reward described. So this verse may be a commentary on vv. 9-11 generally, but it is still connected in context to what precedes it and what follows.

What is this reward the blessed man receives? James calls it, “The crown of life”. There are numerous crowns mentioned in Scripture, most of them in the NT.^{vi} The traditional teaching views these crowns as various rewards granted to those who overcome, so that when they enter heaven, they are given these crowns – some may get 1, others 3 or 4 – but all, according to Rev. 4:10, are said to cast these crowns in tribute at Jesus' feet. This is great sentiment if that is your goal, but is it biblically accurate? Even the text of Rev. 4:10 identifies not all, but the 24 Elders alone (whoever you believe they are) as casting crowns at Jesus' feet.

Tom Schreiner and Ardel Caneday have a different viewpoint, and I am inclined to agree with them; Dealing with James 1:12, they say, “One could understand this to refer to a reward that is given in addition to eternal life. But a canonical reading of James suggests that eternal life itself is the reward. James contends in his most famous passage that faith without works is dead and that “faith” that lacks works cannot save (James 2:14-26). This fits with the idea that the test of genuine faith is persevering under trial. Those who do so will receive the reward of eternal life. Those who wilt under trials have a faith without works. Similarly, James says that those who hear the word without keeping it ‘deceive

themselves' (1:22). That is, they claim to be believers but deny it by the way they live. Similarly, those who endure trials will receive the crown of life and an eternal inheritance. Those who crack under trials so that they abandon their faith forever will not receive the crown of life, for they have deceived themselves by thinking they were believers. In other words, enduring under trials is not optional for believers, nor is there a special, unique reward for believers who persist when tested. All believers must stand fast when buffeted in order to obtain the crown of eternal life. We are not suggesting, of course, that believers do not fail or sin when experiencing trials, for James himself says we all stumble in many ways (3:2). Persevering under trials does not suggest some kind of perfectionism; it means that we do not forsake Jesus Christ when tested."^{vii}

God has promised this crown of life to those who love Him, and that makes all kinds of sense when compared to the quote above. The aspect of perseverance that James presupposes of those who go through such tests successfully from v. 12 is a precursor to faithful living. Christopher Morgan contends, "Like a muscle that becomes strong when it faces resistance from a weight, Christians develop spiritual strength and stamina by facing trials. It is hard to imagine how perseverance could be developed in any other way than by such resistance, since perseverance presupposes a pressure to endure."^{viii}

IV. The True Source of Sin

vv. 13-16

These 3 verses are very important and it is crucial that we as believers comprehend James's argument here. It is human nature to rationalize away our own culpability when we do wrong – whether sin, a mistake, or some miscarriage of justice we've done. We inherited this trait – cf. Gen. 3:12-13 / cf. Rom. 5:12-18. Eve tries to shift her sin onto the serpent & divest herself of any responsibility for her actions, but Adam uses the shotgun approach – "it was the woman YOU gave me God", and in case you missed it, "God, it's really your fault because You gave her to me!" Notice with me Psalm 36. This Psalm carries many of the same themes that James picks up in our verses here regarding the origin of our sin.

People with little kids usually find out sooner or later than an additional, trouble-causing person is living with them, whose name is "not me". Can anyone really doubt that we are born with sinful natures?

James puts these 3 verses here because Christians, especially those who have a strong view of the sovereignty of God, might just think that the trial they are going through, especially if it has come with some inherent temptations to sin, is God tempting them. After all, He controls everything doesn't He? It is James's intention to deal with that sort of thinking early on in his letter.

Truth be told, as a Calvinist, it is sometimes difficult to separate God's sovereignty & our own responsibility. There sometimes is an attitude of stoicism that takes over – the idea that "what will be will be", so we lose our ability to separate God's will that we be holy from our desire to do what we know is wrong, and then foolishly presume that God was behind our bone-headed decision. But Scripture does not allow us to think that way because time after time, we see man's responsibility alongside God's

sovereignty in the same scenes – cf. Phil. 2:12-13; Acts 2:22-24; 4:27-28; Gen. 50:20, etc.^{ix}

James is clear that you cannot charge God with being the cause of your sin, because He tempts no one to sin, and is Himself not tempted by evil (or sin)^x, and He does guide circumstances in order for certain things to occur as part of His plan – eg.) Gen. 45:8; Isa. 10:5-19 . God places people into life situations where their own desires come to the surface and **they** act on them, not God. Yet, God does know the outcome and has intended that outcome. God does not tempt, He tests.

We find God's tests throughout the Bible – He tested Abraham when He told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22; He tested Israel by surrounding them with pagan nations in Judges 2:22; and He left King Hezekiah to his own devices in receiving the envoys from Babylon in II Chronicles 32:31; II Kings 20:12-19, etc.^{xi}

But, do these 'tests' [interestingly, the same Greek word translated 'temptation' & 'test' – *peirazo*] lead to failure on the part of the one tested, thus turning it into a temptation? Scott McKnight sees 3 possibilities in v. 13 going from Greek to English:

- a.) *peirazo* as a test only – as in, “No one, when tested should say, “I am being tested by God”.
- b.) *peirazo* as both test and tempt – as in, “No one, when tested should say, “I am being tempted by God.”
- c.) *peirazo* as tempt only – as in, “No one, when tempted should say, I am being tempted by God.”^{xii}

In point “a”, we know God tests people, we have already looked at a few examples. Point “c” is possible, and the ESV, NASB, NKJV, NIV, KJV & NET all go that route. The HCSB says, “No one undergoing a trial should say, “I am tempted by God”. McKnight prefers “b” because he believes it sums up James 1:1-12 better.^{xiii}

Paul, in I Cor.10:13 brings in a more pastoral tone in dealing with a similar situation. Paul's belief in a sovereign God compels him in this verse to see that God cares for His people so much that “He prevents them from being stretched beyond their limits.”^{xiv} Jesus, in the Lord's prayer – cf. Matt. 6:13 - tells us to pray, “*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*” Jesus's focus here is on eschatological things & the coming of the Kingdom & God's will being done on earth – again – God totally sovereign so we pray that He would not even put us into the position of needing to battle against temptation.

It seems possible to some that James had Jesus' temptation at the hands of Satan in the wilderness in mind here – Matt. 4:1-11. Notice Christ's ability, even in a severely weakened state up against the top adversary and predator, to fend off temptation and see his words in 4:7. But also note v. 1, “*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*” D.A Carson says of Matt. 4:1, “That Jesus should be led “by the Spirit” to be tempted by the devil is no stranger than Job 1:6-2:7 or 2 Samuel 24:1 (I Chron. 21:1). Recognising that “to tempt” (*peirazo*) also means “to test” in a good or bad sense somewhat eases

the problem. In Scripture, “tempting” or “testing” can reveal or develop character (1 Cor. 7:5; 1 Thess. 3:5)....In Jesus’ temptations God clearly purposed to test Him just as Israel was tested, and Jesus’ responses prove that He understood.”^{xv}

So God does not tempt us but He certainly tests us, and Satan can tempt us (James 4:7) & his demons likely have this power as well, but Satan’s temptation of humans is a fall-back position like Eve’s deflection of responsibility for her sin, “the serpent deceived me”. For us, a well-used dodge is to claim, “the devil made me do it”. James does not even nibble at that scenario as for him, the answer is supplied in vv. 14-15.

The real source of our sin is us. James is not alone in this biblical opinion. Mark 7:20-23 (Jesus); Gen. 8:21 (Moses, God); Jeremiah 17:9 for examples. Rom. 3:23 & 5:12 tell us that all have sinned – it’s our very nature. James says we sin when we are “lured & enticed” by our own desire, and note the singular personal pronoun – “by **his** own desire.” We can’t blame each other, so if we sin, that sin is on us – it is our responsibility. If we are in the grip of lust, the fault is ours alone.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, WW II Lutheran martyr said, “With irresistible power, desire seizes mastery over the flesh...It makes no difference whether it is sexual desire, or ambition, or vanity, or desire for revenge, or love of fame and power, or greed for money...Joy in God is...extinguished in us and we seek all our joy in the creature. At this moment God is quite unreal to us, he loses all reality, and only desire for the creature is real;...Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God...the lust aroused envelops the mind and will of man in deepest darkness. The powers of clear discrimination and of decision are taken from us. The questions present themselves: “Is what the flesh desires really sin in this case?” “Is it really not permitted to me, yes – expected of me, now, here, in my particular situation, to appease desire?”... It is here that everything within me rises up against the word of God.”^{xvi}

Verse 15 is not expressing a secondary action, but a continuous and logical progression – lured, enticed by desire, which desire gives birth to sin. Not all desire is evil, only the desire we allow to grow in our heart and mind, and then decide to follow it as a fish follows a lure. It promises pleasure & satisfaction, but sin never delivers what it promises, at least not for long. Our desire becomes the lure and enticement, and the drawing away is always in any direction away from God, as Bonhoeffer noted above.

Here is where spiritual discernment must kick in and why maturity in the faith alongside a knowledge of God’s word is so critical. As we grow in grace, one of the things that happens is we begin to recognise sin in our life in areas we never considered to be sin before. We realise that our thought life can be very dangerous to our soul. Rom. 8:5-8 offers a sobering warning to us. If we allow our flesh to rule over us, to enslave us, to have dominion over us as it did before we were saved, the results could be evidence of a hypocritical false profession of faith, which is an extremely dangerous state to be in – cf. Rom. 6:22-23.

When we allow sin to fester in our lives & let our desires control us rather than God’s word and His Spirit in us, death will be the result. This could mean death physically as in 1 Cor. 11:30; or spiritual death if one has not sought Christ as Lord and Saviour to erase those sins.

Either way, sin for the believer is not to be trifled with. John Owen famously said, “be killing sin, or it will be killing you.” Sin is deadly poison and if taken in by us, will take us away from God. This does not mean that a believer will never sin – cf I JN 1:8-10 – because the remedy in I JN 1:9 is plainly a provision for believers. Keep short accounts with God. Don’t allow sin after sin after sin to accumulate in your life and drag you into the world again. Recognise it, confess it, go to Christ with it and be forgiven of it.

James’s parting shot on v. 16 is, “Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers”. IOW, don’t blame God, don’t blame Satan, don’t blame your circumstances – your sin is your sin. It is your responsibility, your fallenness, your lusts, your weaknesses, your rationalization and your sins. “They are within and have to dealt with from within”.^{xvii}

ⁱ R. Kent Hughes, James, Crossway Books, 1991, p. 35

ⁱⁱ IBID, p. 39

ⁱⁱⁱ Lee Atwater, from “Lee Atwater’s Last Campaign” – Life Magazine article Feb. 1991, as quoted in David P. Nystrom, James – The NIV Application Bible Commentary, Zondervan, 1997, p. 65

^{iv} John Wesley, as cited by Hughes, p. 40

^v Nystrom, p. 68

^{vi} Crowns: “of life / NT – James 1:12; Rev. 2:10; “of righteousness” – II Tim. 4:8; “of glory” – I Pet. 5:4 (to elders that serve well); “imperishable” – I Cor. 9:25; “of rejoicing” – I Thess. 2:19; “no one can take it” – Rev. 3:11; “cast crowns at Jesus’ feet” – Rev. 4:10. In the OT - “of pride” – Isa. 28:1,3; “of glory” – Isa. 62:3; Jer. 13:18.

^{vii} Thomas R. Schreiner & Ardel B. Caneday, The Race Set Before Us – A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance, IVP Academic, 2001, pp. 84-85

^{viii} Christopher Morgan, A Theology of James, P & R, 2010, p. 70

^{ix} The theological term for this is “compatibilism”, and it is not explained any better than D.A. Carson explains it in his book, “How Long O Lord?”, Baker, 2006, p. 179

^x Part of a good argument that Jesus could not have sinned, being God in the flesh.

^{xi} Douglas Moo, James, p. 71

^{xii} McKnight, The Letter of James, p. 115

^{xiii} IBID, p. 115

^{xiv} IBID, p. 116

^{xv} D.A. Carson, Matthew, in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Frank E. Gaebelein, editor, Zondervan, 1984; Volume 8, p. 112

^{xvi} Dietrich Bonhoeffer, cited in Hughes, James, p. 48

^{xvii} John MacArthur, James – The MacArthur NT Commentary, Moody, 1998, p. 54