

Believing the Truth about God

James 1:9-18

Over 45 years ago J.I. Packer wrote a book entitled *Knowing God*. In that book he argues rather persuasively that a knowledge of God is the most practical knowledge a person can have. He says that just as it would be cruel to take a person from one country and plopping them down in a major city another country w/o any knowledge of the language or culture or the laws, so too. . .

. . . we are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul. (pp. 14-15)

James had this same conviction about the knowledge of God when he wrote the letter that we call James. In James 1:9-18 James identifies a couple of specific areas of life and says that if you don't understand who God is (and who God isn't) you will misinterpret what is happening to you in ways that are devastating. The two areas of life James addresses are 1) our financial status, and 2) the trials/temptations we face. If we don't understand who God is in relation to these areas of life, we will experience all sorts of unnecessary turmoil and frustration. Therefore, James says in verses 9 throughout 11:

Believe what's true about God (and His kingdom) in relation to your financial status. (James 1:9-11)

In these verses James addresses both poor and rich believers in relation to a very specific aspect of finances. He challenges us to view our financial status in light of their spiritual status in Christ. There **are** other issues related to wealth and poverty that are vital. For example, in chapter 2 James will say that if you see a fellow believer in need of food and clothing and you send them away with nothing but words, your faith isn't alive but dead. Helping the poor is a core commitment of true believers. But that's a different and complementary point to the one James is making here. In these verses James is specifically challenging both rich and poor believers to view their current economic status in light of their heavenly status in Christ. Verse 9:

9 But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position;

The term "brother" designates a believer - a brother or sister in Christ. The term translated "humble circumstances" is the common word for humble; since James will next mention "the rich man" in verse 10, it's clear he's talking about a believer who is in humble circumstances economically. It's likely that the vast majority of those receiving James' letter were in this category. Most were probably day laborers who didn't have money saved up for emergencies; they lived day to day (or week to week).

James' tells the poor Christian to "glory/boast in his high position" (ESV - "in his exaltation"). Of course he's not advocating any type of prideful boasting; he's advocating a type of God-centered boasting (or glorying). James is urging them to look beyond their earthly economic status and find satisfaction in their exalted heavenly status - both now and in the new heaven and earth. [See Note #1]

It strikes me that in our affluent, materialistic culture, very few people (Christians included) would say what James says here. We tend to believe that the material/physical world is all that really matters and that talk about the heavenly realm is just words. We have a hard time believing that you can actually boast in your heavenly status even when you are living in humble circumstances. But the perspective of Jesus and His followers was that we are exiles in this world; this life is very short prelude for the next life. This truth doesn't trivialize the hardships associated with material lack. But it does put that hardship into perspective. The NT consistently teaches that believers have already been raised up and seated with Christ at the right hand of God, and that when Jesus returns we will be raised immortal with a body like His resurrection body. We are challenged to look beyond our status in this life to our status in the next. (See Philippians 3:20-21)

Beginning in verse 10 James addresses "the rich." Some understand James to be addressing wealthy unbelievers (such as those described in chapter 5). But it seems more likely that the term brother in verse 9 governs this verse also (see Moo, Blomberg, etc.). Here's what James writes:

10 and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. 11 For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.

James is alluding to a well-known passage in Isaiah 40:6-8. There Isaiah speaks of "**all flesh**" being like grass that withers and like flowers that fade. What James is describing is true of all humanity - both the poor and the rich; everybody's time on earth is temporary and tenuous. But the poor tend to have no problem remembering that "all flesh is like grass," whereas the wealthy can tend to think, "I'm invincible. I've figured out how to get ahead and stay ahead." Affluence can make us forget that there will be a day when all the money in the world will seem irrelevant.

Think of this this way: If you somehow knew that you would die peacefully in your sleep tonight and would wake up in the presence of the Lord, how would you think about your wealth the rest of this day? Knowing that you will leave it all behind tomorrow - every single penny of it - you would think about it very differently today, wouldn't you? The rest of today you would turn your attention to Jesus and you would think, "My only hope is in Jesus - His death on the cross that paid for my sin, His resurrection that gives me life, and His enthronement that gives Him power over every threat and enemy I face." In other words, the rest of today you would boast only in Christ.

That's the perspective James is urging on every single one of us. Our time on earth is like a day compared to eternity. Jeremiah 9:23–24 expresses a similar thought:

23 Thus says the Lord, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; 24 but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the Lord.

Here's the truth about God James wants us to believe:

Truth: *Whether poor or rich, our boast is always and only in Jesus.*

There will be a day when the poorest believer and the wealthiest believer stand before Jesus empty-handed. Our only boast will be the death, resurrection, and enthronement of Jesus. If we are "in Christ" everything He has will be ours to enjoy. If we plan to boast *only* in Christ on **that** day, we should also boast *only* in Christ on **this** day.

In verses 12 through 18 James pivots from talking about poverty and wealth to trials and temptations.

Believe what's true about God in relation to the trials and temptations you face.
(James 1:12-18)

In these verses James uses the same Greek word to refer both to trials and to temptations. As we'll see, it's clear in verse 12 that he's talking about **external trials that God used to refine us**; this is the theme that was introduced in verses 2 through 4 in which James said that God uses trials to produce endurance/perseverance in our lives. James pronounces a blessing (or beatitude) for those who persevere under trials.

12 Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

Those who allow their trials to refine them will persevere; instead of giving up or giving in, they continue walking with God. This perseverance proves that their faith is genuine. They don't have a faith that says, "I will trust you **if** you do this or that. . ." They have a faith like Job's that says, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

That person will receive "the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." The term crown was used of the laurel wreath that was placed on the head of the victorious athlete (including the Olympics). It's called "the crown of life" meaning that the crown/wreath **is** life - eternal life with God (Revelation 2:10). The description "to those who love Him" is a way of describing a genuine believer. For those who love Jesus, living with Him for eternity is the best reward/crown imaginable.

But beginning in verse 13, James moves from talking about external trials that refine us to talking about ***internal temptations that lure us into sin***. James uses the same word to refer to trials and temptations, suggesting that the same experience can either be a trial used by God to refine us or a temptation that lures us away from God and His will. The determining factor is what we really believe about God in the midst of that temptation. The scenario laid out in verse 13 is so very true to life. When we experience temptations, we very naturally look for someone to blame.

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.

We're generally not so bold as to flat-out say, "God is enticing me to commit this sin." We tend to be more subtle:

- * "If I didn't have such a rough childhood, I wouldn't be tempted with anger and bitterness and jealousy. I look around at other people and think, 'They don't know how easy they have it. . .'" The insinuation is that if God had done a better job protecting me and providing for me, I wouldn't be tempted the way I am.
- * "If God had given me a different temperament. . . or had made me smarter . . . or hadn't made me so smart (brilliance comes with it's own temptations) . . . or had given me a different spouse/kids/parents/siblings. . . I wouldn't face the temptations I do."
- * There are a dozen variations on this. It is true that some people have had a harder life than other people; it's hard to deny that. But the topic James is addressing is whether or not God is the source of temptation, not whether our lives are hard.

We see this dynamic at play in Genesis 3. When God asked Adam, "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" his reply was, "The woman that YOU GAVE to be with me, she gave me from the tree and I ate" (Gen. 3:11-12). He was not only blaming the woman; he was blaming God who gave him the woman.

James gives two reasons why we shouldn't say, "I'm being tempted by God." First, God cannot be tempted by evil; there is *nothing within Him that is drawn to do evil*. Second, therefore, He would *never draw anybody else into doing evil*. People only tempt others to sin in ways that are alluring to them. If, for example, nothing within you wants to go rob somebody else, you're not going to entice others to go rob people. Since God cannot be tempted by evil, He Himself does not tempt anyone.

So where ***does*** temptation come from?

14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.

The term translated lust simply means "strong desires"; here it refers to strong ***sinful*** desires. James tells us that our temptations don't come from God but from our own lusts or sinful desires. It could be the strong desire for sexual gratification, the desire for respect, the desire to be recognized and appreciated, the desire to have your own way, the desire for material prosperity, or the desire for comfort. None of those desires are necessarily sinful, but when those desires/lusts become selfish and self-centered then we are tempted.

He uses imagery from the world of fishing when he writes that we are “carried away and enticed” by our own lusts. Our lusts are akin to a worm on a hook; our lusts look so very appealing. We’re like the fish that thinks, “This is my lucky day. . . what I am contemplating is so very good . . .” But when we “take the bait” we end up being hooked and carried away. Instead of life and satisfaction, we experience death. Our lusts are **that** dangerous.

In verse 15 James uses the imagery of reproduction to make this point.

15 Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

The Message translates this verse: “Lust gets pregnant, and has a baby: sin! Sin grows up to adulthood, and becomes a real killer.” That translation captures the progression James is describing. What starts out as simple desire (which often makes us feel very much alive) grows into something that brings forth death (we are less alive and responsive to God and His ways).

Trials become temptations because of **our own lusts**, because of our sinful desires. James isn’t pointing this out so we’ll engage in self-condemnation or so that we’ll become fixated on our own sinfulness. His point is that we dare not blame God for our temptations because **He is our only hope** in the midst of temptations!

Appropriately, James makes this statement in verse 16:

16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

James uses the term “beloved” to let them/us know that he’s speaking out of affection. He wants us to know that if we blame our temptation (and therefore our sin) on God, we are deceived; we are deluded about God and His intentions toward us. Instead of God being responsible for all the evil and darkness we’re experiencing, God is the giver of all the goodness and light we’re experiencing. Verse 17 expresses this truth eloquently:

17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

If there is anything good in your life, it is from God. Back in verse 5 James said that God **gives wisdom** to everyone who asks Him. He’s not stingy or reluctant; He gives generously and without reproach. When you’re in the midst of some trial or temptation, you need to remember that God loves to give such good gifts to those who ask Him in faith.

In calling God “the Father of lights,” James is saying that God fathered/created the heavenly lights (sun, moon, and stars; see Blomberg, p. 74). Unlike the sun, moon, and stars which go in and out of view, God never changes; there is no variation in His

goodness. The ultimate proof of God's unchanging goodness is what He has done in our lives through the gospel:

18 In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

"In the exercise of His will" - He wasn't coerced or obligated in any way - He brought us forth (literally, He "gave birth to us"). Just as God fathered the heavenly lights, He made us His sons and daughters by "the word of truth," the gospel. Just like the "first fruits" appear on a tree or in the field confirm that more fruit is coming, so too the fact that the gospel was bearing fruit in that day confirmed that more fruit was coming - from among every tribe, tongue, and nation. . . indeed from all of creation! All of this reinforces the fact that we should never blame God for the temptation we experience; we should "give thanks always" because He is always good and always the giver of good gifts.

Just as verses 9 through 11 don't tell us everything we need to understand about poverty and wealth, verses 12 through 18 don't tell us everything we need to know about temptation. Other Scriptures talk about the importance of fleeing temptation (2 Timothy 2:22), how God provides a way of escape for each temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13), how Satan can tempt us (1 Corinthians 7:5, 1 Thessalonians 3:5), how Jesus can help us in the midst of our temptations because of His earthly experience (Hebrews 4:15), etc. But **this** passage challenges us to believe what is true about God in relation to our temptations:

Truth: *God is always good. He uses trials to prove the genuineness of our faith, but He never tempts us to do evil.*

This week you and I will face trials. What we believe about God will determine whether or not those trials turn into temptations. And this week when we become aware of our lusts, what we really believe about God will determine whether we trust God and flee that temptation or whether we are enticed, hooked, and carried away.

J.I. Packer was right: ***Without a deep, abiding knowledge of God***, we stumble and blunder through life blindfold, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understand of what surrounds us. The converse is also true: With a deep abiding knowledge of God - that He is our one and only boast and that He is always good - we have a path in this world, a path that leads to life.

Note #1: The term translated "high position" is often used in relation to the heavenly realm. For example, Jesus promised his disciples that they would be "clothed with power from **on high**" (Luke 24:49 - the same term James used; the Holy Spirit would be sent from heaven). [See also Eph. 4:8.] Therefore, in urging poor believers to "boast in their high position,"