

James 1: 13-18
14-04-02

Introduction

We live in a society where it's always somebody else's fault - a blame culture. If something happens, no matter if we are the one who perpetrated it, we are also the victims. So for example, last year McDonalds were blamed for serving hot drinks, which were ... hot. Or going back to the events of 11th September, where apparently, according to some, it was actually the American policy that was to blame for what happened. Well perhaps in a very roundabout way, it is. But, what about the terrorists? And then there is the criminal who blames it all on a childhood trauma. There's been a massive retreat from being held accountable, responsible. Perhaps we learn it in our very earliest days at children's 'pass the parcel,' when we see the music is about to stop, very quickly, we learn to pass the parcel. And that soon becomes 'passing the buck' when we are a bit older. Well, that is something that we are all part of; we understand that culture because we see it in our own lives. It's so easy, within the home or within work, to be able to point the finger elsewhere and to deny accountability or responsibility. And it was also happening in the Jewish Christian churches to which James was writing way back in AD 45 or thereabouts.

As we saw last week, these churches were facing trials, difficulties, testing times. And amidst these testing times, from time to time, the churches stumbled and fell. Perhaps I can paint one or two pictures of the sorts of things that may have been happening.

For example, we know that there were severe famines in Judea during the 40's. There would have been great financial pressures on the churches. And so in one particular church going through a real financial crisis, a rich couple come to the door. They're involved in the local bank; they've got a very, very good salary. And so as they come through the door, (they've newly moved to the area); they're welcomed most warmly. They're given lots of attention, and the needs of some of the others are neglected, in the rush to make them feel welcome, (to invite them to lunch after the meeting and all the rest of it). The treasurer and the wardens are slightly embarrassed at what they've done, but it's a very difficult situation that is facing the church; they've got to pay their way and they can't see how they're going to do it otherwise.

And then there are a number of very, very difficult individuals in the church. And finally at the end of one meeting, the pastor, uncharacteristically, lashed out in anger at one of them. When he got home, as he was chatting away to his family, he did feel a bit embarrassed. But honestly, it had been a very, very trying time. And he'd felt he could have lashed out to any of them.

And a couple had gone off to college, some of the younger folk. They'd been under a great, great pressure, living in a shared house, just to join in with what all the others were doing; going to that particular film, doing the lottery together, allsorts of things. And eventually, just at the start of the third term,

they felt under so much pressure that they just decided to join in. Again they felt a bit embarrassed and they hoped that the church leaders back home wouldn't get to know. But honestly, it had been a very, very hard situation for them.

And there were other situations, but those three situations had somehow got back to James. And he'd sent an email just asking the church leaders whether everything was okay. And the church had met that night as a church council, and they decided to reply to James and they said, "Would you stop being critical of us, do you realise what sort of pressures we're going through? There's not much money around, there's a lot of difficult people out there, there's a lot of pressure from the world, and we're really struggling. And you are putting the blame on us. Look, God has put us into this position, we are really struggling. Yes, we might have fallen, but we didn't choose this, we're really going through difficult times. We're not to blame!"

And so James picked up his pen and he starts penning the letter that we have in front of us.

In chapter 2, he deals with that problem of favouritism with the rich. In chapter 3, he deals with that pastor who's lashed out at the member of his church. In chapter 4, he deals with the folk who have caved in with the pressure of worldliness.

And here in chapter 1, in verses 13 to 18, he deals with one of these root issues. How do we cope when we are going through trials and when we stumble and fall within them and when we succumb to temptation? How are we to think in those situations? Is God to blame for leading us into those situations? How are we supposed to think about them? And as we try to, as it were, think our way in to the situation that James was trying to encourage these churches in, we're going to look at these under two headings. One, he exposes the way in which they had the wrong picture about God, verses 13-15. And then in the second half, verses 16-18, he explains how they can get the right picture about God. So let's look: is God to blame?

A. The Wrong Picture About God (verses 13-15)

1. Is God to Blame?

We might think so. He has led them through these trials and difficulties, as James has said, as we saw last week, in verses 2-4. But, James wants us to be very clear about God, so let's look at God's character in verse 13.

'When tempted, no-one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil...'

God cannot be tempted by evil. Can you imagine a rock face with lots and lots of handholds and footholds to get to the summit, and then contrast it with another slope, which is as smooth as glass, where there are no purchases possible, whatsoever. And the latter, as it were, is a picture of the holiness

and the perfection of God, where evil has no opportunity to get a hand or foothold. And so God is not swayed by evil at all, but only by His own holy and sovereign purposes. Yes, He will certainly weave the evil that is around into His sovereign plans, rather like a tapestry. But the evil does not come from within Him, in any shape or form. And so having described God's character, James then says, *'nor does he tempt anyone.'* He does not lead us into that evil. Yes, He will direct us very clearly on the right road, which may well be a very steep uphill path. Yet, if we decide, as we go up that path, to look to the right or the left, and we see what we think is an easier way, a shortcut; He is not responsible for the fact that we take that shortcut and drift off the route. He has led us through trials, but it is not He who has caused us to take the wrong road when we go through those difficulties. Here's just a simple illustration of this: you go away on holiday, you leave the house empty and untended, and a local member of the criminal fraternity discovers this and is tempted to break in, which he does. Now, who is responsible? Is it the owners, for putting temptation in the way of the criminal? Well, hardly. No, the owner is not the blame at all. So, who is to blame?

2. Who is to Blame?

Well, let's look at verse 14 and see what James says: *'but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.'* It is our sinful desires, which are responsible. In other words, we can never pin it on God. It is we who are responsible, even if we are actually going through very difficult days, very difficult trials. When we slip up, we cannot point the finger elsewhere, says James. We are the ones who are responsible. And so he paints this picture: perhaps imagine a fish seeing a brightly coloured fly. It is drawn to it, because it looks attractive and satisfying. It swallows the fly and as it does so, it swallows the hook that is concealed. It then thrashes around, but is then dragged away. And that is the thought that is behind these word pictures that James paints here, of the one who is enticed and dragged away. And of course, that's what happens with us, isn't it? We are, each one of us, in various ways, drawn along by our sinful desires. And we then swallow sin and then find ourselves hooked. Sinful activity is always going to be attractive, at the time. Indeed, it is likely to be most attractive, at the time. And yet it always promises far more than it delivers. And what it delivers, hides the hook, which drags us in even deeper. And as we look back, we have no one to blame but ourselves. Isn't that what happens in our lives? As we think about our desires, in all sorts of areas whether in terms of money, sex, in terms of ambition, in terms of a whole host of areas. What James is describing and painting is a very realistic picture of how each of us falls. And what is the result?

3. What is the result?

We see that in verse 15: *'Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.'* So evil desires will eventually lead to death. It's the picture, if you like, of a documentary programme on the life cycle of an animal, of how the whole breeding circle goes around issuing in life. But, here we have this remarkable little phrase, at

the end of verse 15 that it gives birth to death; a strange phrase. Yesterday, I spent a little bit of time with the children at the Wildfowl Reserve, and we were intrigued to discover that they'd already had a sighting of a cuckoo. We didn't see it or hear it, for that matter. But, just imagine a situation where the cuckoo's egg is laid in the nest of a meadow pipit. And there, it is warmed by the meadow pipit, and eventually, comes to that stage where it hatches out. And then as it grows, it starts to take over and it kicks the other eggs or fledglings out of the nest. And so, that hatching, that birth, only leads to death to the rest of the brood. And so it is with sin, which is, as it were, like a cuckoo's egg, laid in our lives, which begins as an apparently harmless desire, but grows and hatches and makes demands and makes more demands and starts to take over, and leads to death. Paul, in his writings says that the wages of sin is death, using a different sort of analogy taken from the world of finance, the world of business. But, it's the same point that is being made. And what is the major thing that comes out of verses 13-15? It is very simply that God is not to blame for our sinful weakness in falling into sin. It is us – we are the ones who are responsible. And the fact that we blame God, as we so easily do, (as we were thinking of those fictional folk, in those early churches, as they were saying, 'We're not to blame, don't blame us, James'), the fact that we can blame God so easily for our folly, is just another example of our double-mindedness that we were thinking about last week. As Christians, we know that God is sovereign; we know that He speaks to us in His word; we know that He is holy; we know that His desires for us are holy. And yet as sinners we listen to our own desires, we listen to the world around us, and we blame God and we go our own way. And James says, it's double-mindedness again, issuing in half hearted Christianity, where we have the name of Christian, and yet our practice is highlighted by our sinful failures. So it's a devastating exposé of what was happening in the churches to whom James was writing. And indeed, it's a devastating exposé of our own lives and of our own failures. But it's not necessarily negative, because 'forewarned is forearmed.' And perhaps if we are struggling in areas even tonight, facing perhaps massive temptations, we need, at one level, to recognise the grace and goodness of God who is able to give us forgiveness. That is true. But on another level, we also need to recognise our personal accountability before God. One of our growth points will be when we say, 'There's nobody else to blame except me. I am the one who has to face up to this. I am the one who must resist evil. I am the one who must recognise sinful allure when I see it, and I am the one who must cry out for God and for God's Spirit to help me in all my weakness.' Forewarned is forearmed. Otherwise, we are hooked and sink deeper and deeper.

B. The Right Picture About God (verses 16-18)

But let's now turn to the right picture about God, and turn to verses 16-18. James says don't be deceived into thinking that it is God's fault; don't be deceived into thinking that He's against us all the time because He sends trials in our way. No, we are to look at things in a different light. And in this passage, verses 16-18, as I hope that you can see from the way that I have structured it in the notes, there are parallels with verses 13-15, which I think are quite deliberate. So what is God like?

1. What is God like?

(i) Character

We've seen His character described before in verse 13, and now James adds in verse 17, that He is '*...the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*' The heavenly lights would be the moon and the planets, which change day-by-day or week-by-week in terms of the light and the shadow that is there. So sometimes, the moon is very bright; at other times it is almost completely obscured – it changes in the course of the month. But the Father of those lights, the one who created them is not like that, insists James. He is unchanging. There is a consistency in God's character; a dependability about Him. He does not wane and wax. He does not ebb and flow. But there is this consistency, this single-mindedness about God.

(ii) Actions

And therefore, we look at His actions in verse 17, that every good and perfect gift is from above; it flows from Him. It flows from His character; from His unchanging goodness. His good gifts flow. There is a parallel with the teaching that we receive from our Lord Himself in Matthew 7 v11 – that we have as the motto verse for our monthly prayer event. Jesus says: '*If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!*'

Now all of us here, whether we are parent or not, know how to give good gifts for somebody's birthday. Whether it's to a schoolmate, whether it's to a colleague at work, whether it is to a grandchild, to a son, to a daughter; we know how to give good gifts. And so it is with God; it flows down from His unchanging nature to pour out His goodness upon His children. But note here what is said. It says that, '*Every good and perfect gift is from above...*' Now, it doesn't quite come over in the version that we have before us, but there is a correspondence between the words that James uses in verse 17 and the words that he uses in verse 4 of this chapter – you might want to look at it. Literally, what is said in verse 4 is that, '*Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete ...*' That word, 'complete' could well be translated 'perfect.' And so there is a correspondence between that and verse 17 about 'every good and perfect gift', i.e. 'every good and complete gift is from above.' And this correspondence leads us to see that God's goodness is not going to be indulgence upon His children. But, it is going to be that one of His good and perfect gifts is to bring the believer to maturity, or to completeness, or to, yes, perfection. His perfect gift is to lead us to perfection, to completeness, eventually, to glory. And therefore, even the trials that God sends to assist in that process of maturity and completeness, are to be viewed in the light of His unwavering goodness and commitment to bring us to perfection and glory. It's not that James is saying, "Yes He sends trials," full stop. And now if we look at another aspect of God's character, we see that He sends "good and perfect gifts." The two need to be joined

together, as the correspondence in the words in verse 4 and 17 graphically show. Now what are the results of this, in verse 18?

2. What is the Result?

Well, the result of Him sending “good gifts” to us is that, *‘He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.’* Not as in verse 15, a birth to death. But a contrast now - a birth to life. To new life. And the greatest sign of God’s goodness is in granting us that new life as God’s word, as it says in verse 21, is “planted” within us. God’s word, if we follow verse 21, is like a seed that is planted in us which brings life and growth and eventual maturity. And to pursue that illustration of the seed and the plant: that plant may need pruning to fulfil its potential in order to bear fruit to the pleasure of the gardener. But the sign of the gardener’s love and concern is not just that he or she prunes that plant, but that he planted it in the first place and cultivated that seed and caused it to grow. And so the sign of God’s goodness, is in the pruning, but also in the planting and nurturing of that seed. And in the same way, James is saying that we can be convinced of God’s goodness in the very fact that He has planted new life in us by His Spirit through His Word.

And the purpose of God’s good work is that we become His “firstfruits” within His creation. “Firstfruits” are literally, the first of the crop. You can imagine the gardener, perhaps it’s Mum, bringing in some tiny little potatoes covered in mud into the kitchen and saying, “Look at these!” And the children say, “Wuhh, I’m not gonna eat that.” But there they are, they are the first of the crop, and the gardener is proud of them. In the Old Testament, “firstfruits” were not just the first part of the crop, but they always belonged to God in a very special way. And the “firstfruits” gave Him special delight, such that Israel was, from time to time (I quote here Jeremiah 2 v3), described as God’s “firstfruits” – the part of creation that especially belonged to Him and that He especially rejoiced in. And here we are told that we, the believers, (yes believers passing through trials, believers stumbling even in temptation), are His “firstfruits” - the ones who specially belong to Him, the ones in whom He delights. Yes, He delights in us. And at the same time as He delights, He leads us even through difficult days. But those difficult days must not obscure the fact that we are His “firstfruits” and He still delights in us as such.

And what is the major point here? Well, if the major point in the first half, verses 13-15, was to expose our double-mindedness; verses 16-18 highlights God’s single-mindedness. As He pours out His goodness in order to bring life and maturity into His people, so that He can constantly delight in us; we see His purpose. And whether He is sending us into good times or hard times, that is His purpose: that He would take great delight in all His children and bring us to that day (verse 12) when we will receive the “crown of life” that God has promised to those who love Him. Perhaps if I can throw out an illustration: just imagine a great musician who writes a piece of music and assembles an orchestra and choir, though none of those who are in this orchestra or choir are proven at all as of having much ability. Then he starts to work on them in the rehearsals. With some he is encouraging, with others

he admonishes; he instructs, he puts them through their paces. For some it's a very, very painful time, but one day the work is performed in public and each member of that orchestra and choir fulfils their potential, and the whole work highlights the greatness and skill of that composer. And there we have a tiny, little glimpse of what God is doing, who has drawn us into His purposes and will use all that He can in order to fulfil our potential, the potential not of selfish ambition, but the potential for holiness and bearing fruit that will bring glory to God our Father.

Conclusion

And so as we come to a close, let's not be those who blame God for our weakness in falling into sin. Let us heed the warning. Each one is tempted by his or her own evil desire; he is dragged away and enticed. Let us heed the warning and do all that we can with God's help to watch out at our points of weakness, to recognise our frailty, to be accountable for our lives before our Holy Father. But let us also remind ourselves of God's good and gracious purposes, which are indeed focussed on us in these verses. In verse 18, *'He chose...'* – he didn't have to. "He chose" to give me, "He chose" to give you *'...birth through the word of truth...'* that He has planted in you, so that you and I can be His "firstfruits" which will bring pleasure to Him through all eternity. Let us not be double-minded and blame God, but let us rejoice in God's single-mindedness in choosing us and in doing all that He can as He leads us through trials to prepare us for eternity with Him. Amen.