

Today we begin a study in the letter of James. I changed the title to “Laces, Not Velcro”. How many of you have taught small children to tie shoes. Isn’t it easier just to have Velcro? That is right, it is lots easier. But the title of the message is “Laces, Not Velcro”. We will figure out why that is the case. What we are going to do [this morning] is to look at James 1:1-4, but I would like to begin by reading all the way down through verse [18] so we get the full sweep of that opening section. Please join me:

1. *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion; Greetings.*
2. *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, (v. 3) for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness, (v. 4) And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*
5. *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. (v. 6) But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. (v. 7) For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; (v. 8) he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*
9. *Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, (v. 10) and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. (v. 11) For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.*
12. *Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. (v. 13) Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. (v. 14) But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. (v. 15) Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*
16. *Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. (v. 17) Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (v. 18) Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*

It is that last statement in verse 18 that occasioned the reading out of John’s gospel as our invocation. We are the fruit, we are the product, we are in fact the direct creative action of God. I am not here referring to that initial creation of us in the womb of whatever woman gave birth to us. I am rather referring now to the direct creative action of the Word of God coming into the heart and mind of the unbeliever and making a new creation which is shaped after the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the business of God from that moment on to continually draw us to Himself through Jesus Christ so that we increasingly have the qualities and characteristics of Jesus Himself. That is the creative purpose of God. That person created by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit in us, that is the person that feeds on the Word of God and is strengthened by that word. That is the person with whom we in the body of Christ are always concerned. That is the person who will abide forever, who follows after Jesus Christ.

Coming back again to James, just to pick up the beginning of the letter and deal with what usually are a couple of questions that come to mind, you want to know who is writing the letter and to whom the letter is directed. So we begin with those two questions and the first question is, “Who was James”, just to make certain that we are not thinking of the wrong person. This is not the fisherman who was the brother of John. James and John were a couple of the first men called to be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. But as a matter of fact that James was martyred very early in the life of the church. This James is Jesus’ half-brother, born of Mary, born not of the Holy Spirit but of Joseph, Mary’s earthly husband. For a long time, in fact for the entirety of Jesus’ earthly life, James did not believe in Jesus as being the Son of God. Don’t you think that would have been a tough assignment? “My older

brother is the Son of God!” Now often times [older brothers] think they are and act that way, but that is not the same thing at all as being in fact, so you want to have your sights correct. So he was His blood brother. After His resurrection we are told in I Corinthians 15 that Jesus came and specifically revealed Himself to James. What an act of grace, to come and clarify the reality of that identity and affirm that relationship that he might know who He was! So James came to believe.

He became a strength and pillar as Paul later on says about him, in the life of the church and in Acts 15 we have the account of what is often called the first all church council in the life of the church. There we discover that James is the moderator of that gathering in Jerusalem. It was a conference that had been called to settle a number of issues that had come up as they were trying to figure out what were the right practices of the church in light of the fact that they were shifting from the Old Covenant to the New and all that was implied in that, and implied in that was the inclusion of the Gentiles who did not know the Law and were not conformed particularly to its ceremonies. There were many issues that had to be dealt with, and in that hot conversation not only was James the moderator, but he was also the mediator and worked to establish peace amongst the different parties.

Beyond that we know that he was married and we also know that he was a man of prayer. It was said of him that he was such a man of prayer that his knees actually became calloused because he was so often and so long praying to his God. No doubt he had good reason to do so. Leading the church in Jerusalem at this time in the life of the church was a time when first the Jews persecuted the body and then after a bit of time the Romans joined them and persecuted the body. So from both sides as it were the church was struggling to find its way, its standing, how to live in this contentious and hostile society. Those differences, if you read Acts 6, penetrated the life of the church so that even within the body of the church there were contentions and divisions and differences in point of view as to how to carry out their lives together.

Not only that, but during the days of James not only did he see [the other] James executed, but he also saw the death of Stephen, the first martyr. So it would take a man of great strength, a man of great character, and a man of deep faith in order to lead this new body. So that is James, that is the man who drafts this letter. You can instantly see the relevance when he says, “You can count it all joy when troubles come.” For there was one trouble after another as they sought to figure out who they were, how they were going to live and how they were going to develop a new community of faith in the context of a hostile world.

Well, secondly then, who are the twelve tribes of Israel in the dispersion? There are two answers given to this. The first is that James in drafting the letter was following the lead of Jesus his older brother. When Jesus came and was ministering amongst the Jews, giving the gospel of the kingdom He said specifically, “I have only come for the children of Israel. That is the only ones I am going to.” From that perspective James could possibly have been writing to the twelve tribes of Israel. That is the sons of Jacob. They have long since been dispersed throughout the Roman Empire and beyond to Babylonia. The dispersion began particularly under the Assyrians when they came and destroyed the northern ten tribes. Then Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonians and they destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple and hauled the Jews off to Babylonia. The dispersion then became permanent. Later on the Persians who conquered Babylon gave permission to the Jews to return, rebuild the Temple, but only about 50,000 of them returned. The majority of Jews to this very day no longer live in the Promised Land. There are more Jews in America than any other place in the world.

So that is one way of saying that he wrote the letter to the dispersed Jews. The other answer that is given is that actually James is writing to the steadily increasing number of Christian converts whose experience now so closely paralleled that of the Jews. They were also persecuted. They were called all manner of terrible things. They were accused of being atheists because they would not believe in the panoply of gods that the Romans and Greeks believed in. In particular they would not worship the genius, that is, the spirit of the Emperor. And yet the defining

quality of the Christians, as all in that day knew and confessed, was their extreme devotion to the one God, and for that they were persecuted. We do not know exactly when James wrote this letter. But if he wrote the letter after the Acts 15’s council, it is almost a certainty that he wrote it to the church and not to the scattered Jews, for by then the incorporation of Jew and Gentile had become a settled principle in the life of the body and it would be odd that he would make that distinction. Either way we can read with great profit what this man had to say about living the Christian life.

Those two questions then bring us to the substance of this letter. Immediately we are confronted with what can only be called a radical departure from the normal perspective on the issues of life. What he says is, “*Count it all joy when you meet the trials of life.*” I had a happy occasion after I came back from the conference that I attended in Minnesota. [Comments on the conference.] My Brother has a son, Chris, who is about 40 years old. His wife recently had twins. He has agreed that while his wife goes to school and works that he will watch the twins! Count it all joy when various things happen that you did not anticipate! That is what we pray for.

We know that it is not normal to respond to adversity with joy. We know that even if we know, which I suspect most of us in this room do, that responding to trials, working through conflicts and difficulties is in fact the way character is built. We are strengthened by that process. We know that that is true, but it is hard to welcome such opportunities with joy.

In light of the challenge James says there are rewards for endurance. There are rewards for confronting these trials. The first is that you develop steadfastness. So I pulled up a definition of steadfastness off the Internet. I do that so you can double check me. You can pull one up on your own and see what it says. “1. fixed in direction; steadily directed: a **steadfast** gaze. 2. firm in purpose, resolution, faith, attachment, etc., as a person: a **steadfast** friend. 3. unwavering, as resolution, faith, adherence, etc.” Trials can make us steadfast. That is the idea.

There is a second reward that follows on the first. The second is that we become “perfect and complete and lacking in nothing.” What do you think? That is a bold claim, isn’t it: Perfect, complete, lacking in nothing. I want to let that hang in our minds for a bit. A question came to my mind when I got to this point in wrestling through the letter. I thought to myself, “Why didn’t James just say that working through trials makes us like Christ?” We become Christ-like. Surely that is a good goal, a desirable goal: becoming like Christ. I assume that is at the heart of what it means to pursue the Christian life. But you know there is a difficulty with this isn’t there. I read the Bible about one and a half to two times a year. It is a constant practice of mine. So over the years of reading I have a fair degree of familiarity, and the more I read the Bible the more I am overwhelmed. Jesus is an unusual role model. To put the matter mildly, Jesus is a person whose character is huge. Can we really comprehend? Can we really be like Him in that sense? I would agree that He is an ideal that we should aspire to. But don’t you think that it would be risky in the extreme, in fact as I put it down that it would be ludicrous for anyone to say, “I am perfect, and I lack nothing.” What do you think? How many of us know someone that we would say of them, “That person is perfect and lacks nothing”? The notion is absurd. Therefore I do not think that is what James means.

I said we want to hang on to that question. The fullness of Jesus is simply beyond our grasp. Consequently we inevitably operate with scaled down models. We operate with as much of the definition as we can handle at any one time. This is not wrong, for it is the best we can do. All is well as long as we remain clear that our model of Jesus is limited and inevitably heavily colored by our own prejudices and biases and understandings. Consequently if we are operating according to a model, a perception, a picture of Jesus, we must be always open to revisions, always submitted to questions and critical review: new studies in the Bible, fresh commentaries and testimonies from other believers and corrections in our lives by the Holy Spirit. We must recognize that we are always able to improve.

This happened to me. I wrote this out, this message was finished before I went to Minnesota. When I went there I encounter a sledge hammer that said, “You better rethink your perception of Jesus Christ and your relationship to Him and what it means to be saved.” I am thankful to the Holy Spirit that He prepared me ahead of time. I tend to be somewhat rigid and dogmatic. I know that is a surprise to everybody here! This is the way wisdom looks. Wisdom is humble and willing to be instructed.

Some people like to be constantly improving. How many of us know somebody who is excited about always becoming better and overcoming new obstacles, striding forth and meeting the new challenge? They make me tired. In all honesty my response is usually, “I am amazed I got this far, and I don’t know how I can possibly do any better.” I am sort of hanging on. How do you do that? How do you get up morning after morning facing new challenges, facing mountains and climbing them? I just want to stay in bed!

“How” is precisely the right question to ask, for that is the question James wants us to ask. Recently we looked at the startling challenge that Jesus gave to all who wanted to be His disciples. Do you remember this from John 15:1-2? *“I am the true vine and my father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit.”* [It is] always more fruit, more fruit, more fruit. The proper application of that is that when you get up in the morning you say, “Today, Lord God, I hope and desire and I will direct my life to be more fruitful for You than I was yesterday or last week.” How do we do that? Someone pointed this out in reference to the vine – I didn’t when we looked at it [right after Christmas] – and that is that the interesting thing about the branches on a grapevine is that they just produce fruit. They don’t have a decision about it. If they grow, they produce fruit, and if they don’t the vinedresser cuts them off. But there is no big angst, you don’t see the vine saying, “O, maybe I should and maybe I shouldn’t, maybe I could and maybe I can’t, maybe I will and maybe I won’t.” The [branch] just hangs there. That is not the way it is with us. As was oftentimes repeated at the conference I attended, metaphors only work so far. In this case the metaphor only goes so far. You and I as the servants of Jesus in the world have to make choices. We have to in fact decide whether or not we are going to develop the skills and understanding that are necessary to function. We have to make it our business to discover the needs of others and figure out the gifts that the Spirit has given to us that we might respond to those needs. We need to be open to and look for opportunities to step forward and meet those needs as we engage with other people and touch their lives. These are all choices that we have to make. We are to figure out how to serve.

This is wisdom. This is the search for effective new ways of letting people know about Jesus Christ, touching them with His love. We know this, that the heart of the Christian faith is to think of others rather than thinking of our selves. Just like rejoicing in trials, so thinking of others rather than ourselves runs against the grain.

We return therefor to the common response, common on the inside even if silent on the lips: how do we bear abundant fruit? How do we endure trials with joy and become perfect and complete and lacking in nothing? James tells us. We do it with wisdom.

Here is a definition of wisdom. Wisdom is “1. good sense: the ability to make sensible decisions and judgments based on personal knowledge and experience; 2. wise decision: good sense shown in a way of thinking, judgment, or action; 3. accumulated learning: accumulated knowledge of life or of a sphere of activity that has been gained through experience.” Wisdom is the ability to put knowledge to work. No work, no wisdom. It has often been pointed out that within the body of Christ, that is, the people who gather week by week to worship, there are millions and millions of relatively well educated people who don’t do much [for the faith or for others as servants of God]. This is probably the reason why in spite a constant exposure to portions of the word of Christ the body of Christ remains remarkably ignorant both of the Word and the doctrine. It is because you don’t gain an in depth understanding until you apply. When you apply, when you take up the challenge to address somebody else with the

Word of God and to carry out the acts of God’s mercy and kindness to someone else: it is only when you are willing to engage the resistance, sometime the hostility and oftentimes just the indifference of those whom you try to touch with the love and grace of God; when you push forward you suddenly realize now I am beginning to understand what is the meaning of prayer, what is the meaning of prayer, what is the meaning of perseverance, what is the meaning of humility, what is the meaning of all these qualities that Jesus Christ lived out. They are lovely words on the page, but they come alive in our hearts when we begin to suffer for Christ’s sake. Wisdom comes when we learn what the resources are that are available for the task, the resources that are ours in Christ.

Only God does all things well. You may know some people who think they do all things well, but probably you know better. No church can do all things well. Consequently it is necessary to continually review and figure out who you are and what you can do and how that can best be used to bless others instead of setting out to accomplish all things in every place and all times. That is the responsibility of leadership in a church, to narrow down the perspectives sufficiently so we can put to good use they gifts and the spirit that have been built into a local body.

When Warren Wiersbe, and I hope some of you know who he was, wrote an excellent commentary on James, he takes all of chapter 1:2-12 as a unit. He begins by picking out three particular verbs that he says help us to understand how this portion of God’s Word works. The main topic, he says, is steadfastness, and if you read all of those verses you come again and again to the idea of steadfastness. One of the most amazing examples of steadfastness in my entire life is that every fall a new batch of kids comes [to Oroville Christian School] and Laurel Ferretti allows those children to assemble here and make music, only it is maybe music [in the school band]. My wife and I have listened many times. Laurel is a trained musician, I know she has a trained ear, I know that she knows what beautiful music is like, and I know that it must be an act of the most amazing commitment and discipline and humility for her to come and listen to the screech of what is made! That is perseverance rooted in love for God and those children.

How do we get to that [strength of soul]? What Wiersbe does is to highlight three words from this section. The first word is “count” in verse 2, the second is “know” in verse 3, and the third is “let” in verse 4. Looking at those in order, the Greek word for “count” was the word used for “counting up”. It was used in the world of commerce: “to count up, to assess, to evaluate.” Paul uses the same word in Philippians 3:7-11. Listen to what he says about counting.

*“...whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”*

Paul counted. What did he count? He counted what he was in his own strength as opposed to and over against what he could be and become through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul’s words make clear much of what the New Testament means when it says we become new creatures in Christ. We struggle with this, not understanding, perhaps, what is intended. But there is really a very practical application, and certainly practicality is at the heart of what James is wanting us to understand, and that is that when we are in Christ we shift our scale of values. That is what Paul was saying. What Paul says is deeply challenging: all that I was in my own strength I count as nothing because I count what I have in Christ as everything. If you know the story of Paul you know that he was an outstandingly brilliant and fervent and highly respected member of the Pharisees, admired I am certain by the entire Jewish establishment. But when Christ claimed him, he was willing to put all of that aside and be the servant of Jesus. Our scale of values shifts. So I asked myself this question, and I think any of us should: if someone were to

look at me would they say, “This is a man whose scale of values has shifted away from what they naturally are to what the Bible says they should be”? Count! Count your dreams; count your aspirations; count your ambitions; count what it is that gives you inner satisfaction: these are the issues that arise when we seek to be wise, that we would be steadfast, meeting the trials of life that reshape us according to the purpose of God.

James then tells us the basis for this new scale of values. As believers we know something. That is the second of the terms. What do we know? We know what we have already looked at. We know that faith produces steadfastness. This was a truth far more accessible or readily grasped in the ancient world than in ours. Before the advent of the machine, and especially before labor saving consumer products and antibiotics and sophisticated pain medication and the electronics revolution for businesses and consumers everyone knew, everyone understood that the key to living well in the world was, among a select few other things, hard work. The notion of hard work meant the ability to take up difficult tasks and keep at them until you mastered the necessary skills and finished the task. That is what it meant. That perception of how to function effectively in the world combined two essential qualities: competence and character. There is a proverb that says you are to build your barns before you build your house. That captures the heart of the old perspective: work comes not just before play but before the rewards of comfort as well to say nothing of convenience. I hardly need point out that this perspective is profoundly contrary to that of our consumer culture, the one we live in. What I am pointing out at this juncture is why you and I will probably find it very difficult to listen to James and apply it. It is because we do not live in a culture that says work hard. We live in a culture that says play hard. We do not live in a culture that says, wait, save, then proceed. We live in a culture that says get what you want now and enjoy it. Beloved, I am afraid that there are millions of Christians who attempt to live their Christian in exactly that way and are perplexed when it doesn't work out, because of course it doesn't.

We are, as a result of our technology in particular – and by the way if you are curious I have just completed reading two books on the effects of the modern electronic media on our behavior, our thoughts and our brains. You might want to check those out. We are hugely distractible. We are on some level constantly scanning the horizon hoping for new options, new possibilities, new departures, new experiences and so on, and because we are restlessly, constantly looking for something new we find it difficult to dig in, dig down, be rooted and establish ourselves on anything that we have already committed to. This is where the third word comes into play. The third word is “let”. We have a choice to make, and that choice is to stay with the task or not. We have a choice to make, we have a choice to be distracted or not. We have a choice to make; we have a choice to not grow restless and impatient. What James says is we are to let steadfastness have its full effect. This is deciding to remain in one place until we finally realize God says it's time to move. When you first look at the word “let” you might think that it is kind of a passive word: let your kids eat ice-cream instead of what they were supposed to eat. Let them go out the door and not make their beds. Let it happen. But it is not a passive word; it is profoundly challenging. I think most of us would agree we are faced here with one of the great challenges in the life of faith. How many have prayed, “Lord, give me patience, now!” It is of course the last word that is problematic. That is the prayer of modernity.

How many of us have struggled to remain steadfast with the discipline of prayer, the discipline of reading the Word of God, the discipline of remaining in the fellowship of the body? Those basic disciplines are the means by which we build the habits which equip us to serve others, to remain committed, sticking to it, being steadfast, not running, skipping, moving, turning, dropping, but remaining. James is saying that the new scale of values adopted by believers calls for steadfastness on their part if it is going to bring them through the trials of life such that they become “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” We have already seen that whatever James means by that remarkable statement he cannot mean that believers become just like Jesus, “perfect and complete, and lacking in nothing.” So what on earth can it possibly mean? Contextually if you read the passage what he means is that the believer is complete and perfect and lacking in nothing” in the ability to wait on God for wisdom. “I have learned how to wait; I have learned how to watch; I have learned how to persevere; therefore I know how to stand my

ground and wait upon the Lord.” He contrasts this, if you skip down to verse 8, with someone that he calls a double-minded man. This is the person, “...*the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. He is unstable in all his ways.*” The steadfast person is wise. To be wise you need to be steadfast. That, by the way, is why it is “Laces and not Velcro” in the Christian life.

Please pray with me: our heavenly Father, no one with a rational mind would say that James’ words are easy, perhaps not too hard to understand, but certainly not easy to apply. Yet Father we sense in this man of remarkable devotion and deep prayer, a man who himself persevered through immense trials, we sense that what he has to say is vital, as we ourselves increasingly live in a world that is hostile to the faith and, beyond that simply uncomprehending, they don’t grasp what it is about, and certainly, Father the tempo, the ethos of our age is profoundly out of harmony with Your Word. So we have many occasions to appreciate what James has to say. Teach us, our Father, to be so shifted in our values that we rejoice at every opportunity to grow in steadfastness, indeed that we will be wise. We ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Do you trust God? What is the evidence in your life that you do? 3
2. What are the reasons which most often lead you to not get involved in other people’s lives or in serving others?
3. Are there some things which you can’t believe God would ever give you? Why do you think so? 5
4. In your life what sort of things work against your being steadfast in agreements and commitments? 7
5. Why is strength of character better for happiness than wealth of possessions? 9
6. What does James indicate is the believer’s true source of strength and why is this important for us? 11
7. What does our love for God in response to His love for us make paramount in our lives? 11
8. What is the basic question in the Book of Job? 12
9. What has worked to increase your ability to love God and others? 13
10. How do tests differ from trials according to the Bible? 14

“Laces, Not Velcro”

James 1:1-16

February, 9, 2014

*CD was titled “Perfect and Complete, Lacking in Nothing”*

Pastor John Bronson

II. Are there desires in your life that compete with or in some way compromise your love for God? What might help you in dealing with these?