

Shorter New Testament Letters
James: Wisdom for an Urban Congregation

“Endurance has benefits”

James 1
(Focus: vs 1-18)

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Introduction

1. Timed to the launch of fall sports the athletic shoe company Nike recently released a commercial featuring NFL free agent quarterback Colin Kaepernick.



Kaepernick is best known for kneeling during the national anthems at NFL games to silently protest social injustices, especially the deaths of African-Americans at the hands of the police.¹ His single and simple action set off a firestorm of political and racial debates revealing again, how far our country has to go to be more aware and more willing to address its racialized history.

The inspirational ad features some super star athletes who have transcended their sport to become forces for social good, other lesser known athletes who transcended their circumstances to become professional athletes, and some completely unknown athletes who model Nike's ad and credo "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything. Just do it."

2. For those wondering, this is not the first time that professional sports, social justice, and personality have combined to spark a moment of conflict and awakenings. Not by a long shot. Some here were alive, and I was a mere four-month old baby when this iconic photo was taken...

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/sports/colin-kaepernick-nfl-protests.html> (accessed 9-15-18)



...telling a story similar to the National Anthem protests today, but at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. Back then, two black American track athletes, John Carlos and Tommie Smith, chose to receive the gold and bronze medals while standing barefoot, heads bowed, and wearing the famous black gloves, a symbol of the Black Panther's cause.²

3. The blow back to their actions was fierce with the head of the International Olympic Committee vowing that these athletes would pay the price their entire lives for that gesture, a gesture he thought had nothing to do with the sport.³ Smith and Carlos were immediately suspended from the American Olympic team and expelled from the Olympic Village. Once home, they faced heavy repercussions and death threats.

Time and further awakening to the effects of racism would, in the end, re-position them as heroes in the fight for human rights. In the 2000s they were given ESPY courage awards and had statues erected in honor of their bravery.



It is right to say that their trials tested their resolve to live important truths, and that while their suffering was real and took place over many years, their courageous endurance led them to incredible benefits in the end.

4. We are in a yearlong teaching series on the shorter letters of the New Testament seeking to glean wisdom from the struggle, confusion, and debates of these letters such that we become more

² <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-white-man-in-that-iconic-olympics-photo/> (accessed 9-15-18)

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1968_Olympics_Black_Power_salute (accessed 9-16-18)

clear minded and generous Christ followers amidst our modern struggles, confusion and debates. Today, we begin a six-week journey through the letter of James that we have called, “Wisdom for an Urban Congregation.” First Covenant is a community of people who are urban, suburban, and rural who choose (and many times go way out of the way!) to gather in an urban context for the love of God and neighbor and to lean into the complexity of our context rather than shy away from its complexity.

5. James, the first leader of the Early Church in Jerusalem, wrote a New Testament letter named after him and was, like our more modern justice minded sports heroes, unafraid to lean into the complexity of his context rather than shy away from it. His letter was written to Christian churches spread throughout the Roman Empire in the first century AD. And, in his letter, James addressed several struggles relevant to people who live in dense urban settings including cultural and sociological struggles, economic disparities, and social justice themes.

Today, we look to James’s wisdom for dealing with personal *trials*...those unwelcomed and sometimes unanticipated difficult experiences that we face in life.

James 1:1-18

¹James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. ⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

⁹ Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position.¹⁰ But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love God.

¹³ When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does God tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

¹⁶ Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Creator of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting

shadows. ¹⁸ God chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all God created.

James 1:1-18. NIV

6. The first readers of James's letter were people who faced life-threatening persecution for their faith and socio-economic marginalization because many of the early Christians were impoverished. Some were even slaves. In these first eighteen verses of his letter James instructed the early Christians about some of the attributes of God, gave several imperatives, and worked very hard to reframe their thinking about personal trials.

A. Have Empathy for One Another's Trials

1. Everyone faces trials. Think about it:

- Car accidents
- Broken relationships
- Failed marriages
- Chronic illness
- The death of a loved one
- Difficult or wayward children
- Being a victim of a crime
- Seeking relief from anxiety and getting snared by addiction
- Unreasonable pressure to perform in our work with little chance of success
- The loss of a job
- Financial pressures
- Bullies
- Discrimination in whatever form it comes against our identities

All such things test our sense of well-being and every one of these trials has the potential to suck us into hopelessness and despair. The advice of James? "Consider it pure joy when you face such trials."

2. Has anyone ever said that to you when you were going through a tough time? Did you want to scream at them or kick them in the shins? Uh-huh. Me too! But, maybe we are mis-understanding something here. At first glance, his advice reads like a worn out religious platitude that seems to portray the Christian faith as a shallow and ignorant about the depths of pain that people feel in trials. But, a second glance and further reading shows us that James *challenged us to look beneath the surface of trials and view them as tests that can strengthen us, not as determinative events*.
3. It is all too easy for us to become embittered by our trials or see them as determinative events. If we lose a job, we begin to think, "Maybe I am unemployable". If we are bullied or discriminated against, we think, "maybe I should go away or stay away". If we become addicted to something, we think, "my whole life will be defined by this addiction". James urges us to think differently about our trials.

First, the trials and tests that we face are not some kind of cruel obstacle course designed by God to teach us a lesson. James pointed that out when speaking to the matter of temptations. Contrary to a few theological threads in the Bible (and, remember that the Bible has many and sometimes competing theological threads, and it is our work to net out Jesus' teachings and find wisdom in the fray) the Creator of all things is not some cosmic bully who delights in tripping us up in order to teach us a lesson.

Most importantly, most trials just...are. They are no fault of our own. Now, for sure some trials come our way because of our own bad decisions. I am not discounting that fact. And, yet most trials that come our way are simply a part of life and the result of various out-workings of the big stuff of life: the free will of 7 billion alive today, the laws of nature, and the overflow of differing human natures in our complex intersecting world.

4. Think about this for a moment and in relationship to the most pressing identity conflicts and exclusions of our time. Some of us more than others have very complex and cross-cutting and cultural identities that face epic trials in the swirl of systemic and in many cases traumatic exclusions.

Consider Broad Human Identities such as:

- Gender
- Age
- Sexual identity
- Disability
- Religious or Non-Religious

Then, consider our specific *cultural* Identities, recognizing there are dozens of variations in these:

- Native American
- Post-Colonial Europeans
- African American
- Sub-Saharan African
- Latino
- Asian and Indian

5. Taking into consideration my first list of trials (chronic illness, loss of a loved one, etc), the broad human identities, and our specific cultural identities...WHEW! It's just difficult to be human. And sadly, humans make the human experience even more difficult for one another *than it already is*. No wonder the Creator of all things chose to do something as dramatic as incarnate Jesus the Christ to disrupt our violence, model a whole new archetype of wounded healer and, as James wrote in his letter:

¹⁸ ...give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all God created.

James 1:18. NIV

To me, one way we live like Jesus and as the first fruits of all that God created is by embodying what was written by John Watson, a pastor who lived nineteen hundred years after James and who famously wrote: “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”⁴ Good words for everyone, and especially Christ followers, and especially in diverse communities in American society where our trials are different from one another and it is always tempting to diminish other people’s trials or be immediately be offended or take exception with how much we disagree with someone on some point of their suffering...rather than take a step back and wonder what lived experience may be fueling someone else’ perspective.

And, to be a Christ follower and, as James taught, a kind of “firstfruit” is to go one step further and model the fruit of the Spirit that the Apostle Paul framed in his letter to the Galatian church as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”⁵ Which, when applied to one another’s trials means that we have deep empathy and generous compassion for one another’s trials.

After all, according to James, that is what God does all the time for everyone.

A. Remember that God is for us

1. James wrote:

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, *who gives generously to all without finding fault*, and it will be given to you.

James 1:5. NIV

Thank God, God doesn’t discriminate like humans discriminate! Oh, but wait a minute, in the very next three verses James says:

⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

James 1:6-8. NIV

So, generous wisdom for everyone *except* people who doubt. That’s problematic because as we see in other biblical texts doubt is part of a person’s journey of faith. What’s going on here?

2. The worship planning team had a conversation about how our music in worship ranges from new songs like *Cloud of Unknowing* whose lyric says “Each certainty is clouded now by questions in my mind...so I stay in a place of faith though the road is unclear”⁶ and classic hymns like what we sang today, “The Solid Rock” that declares “On Christ the solid Rock, I stand. All other ground is sinking sand.” The group talked about whether we should focus on more declarative songs to bolster confidence or more vulnerable songs to reflect how we feel most of the time. In the end we

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_Maclaren (accessed 11-4-17)

⁵ Galatians 5:23a

⁶ Cloud of Unknowing, Words by Andrea Hollingsworth and Music by Bruce Balgaard.

said “YES.” It’s both. And ironically, just like the second verse of *The Solid Rock* that says “When darkness veils his lovely face, I rest on his unchanging grace. In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil”—vulnerability and strength are held together in paradox by faith and grace.

So, going beneath the surface of what James wrote, and based on a larger study of Scripture and life—doubt is not the problem...fear and double mindedness are the problem. Let me give you an example from Scripture.

3. There was a time in Biblical history where the ancient Hebrew people had been set free from more than 400 years of slavery in Egypt and were moving from place to place in the desert region between Egypt and the more habitable land in Canaan. Life in the wilderness was miserable. Acquiring the basics of food and water was a challenge on most days and, in the minds of most Hebrews, the idea of resettling in a new land where other people groups were already entrenched was a dangerous proposition with seemingly more risks than returns.

Facing such odds and living in an uncertain “in-between” space, the Hebrew Scriptures tell us that many began to think that while slavery in Egypt was hell on earth, it had more *certainly* than the wilderness and less risk than the dangers of the new “promised land.” Several biblical writers refer to this kind of thinking as rebellion to God’s will for freedom. And, they teach that it was their fears and double-mindedness that kept them from being able to enter a new promised land. If you have the time, I encourage you to read the Scripture Texts of Exodus chapter 17, Numbers chapter 14, and Psalm 95. The balance of these texts tells us the substance of their rebellion was, when facing uncertainty, they chose fear and double minded grumbling over trust and belief.

4. In the New Testament book of Hebrews (a book that we worked on several years ago that is a long and joyfully complex consideration about how the Jewish faith first interacted with the emerging teachings of a Jewish Jesus) the author intriguingly pins the “sin of unbelief” as the practice of making an idol of certainty. The author recalled that the ancient Israelites became so frustrated with their inability to remove doubt from their journey they wanted to abandon God, kill their leader Moses, and settle for what they had known. Thus, it was their inability to accept uncertainty that was the primary cause of their hard heartedness and rebellion.

I wonder if they would have collectively learned to live with doubt as a normal part of life, they might have fared better in their uncertainty and led more faith-filled lives. I wonder if, rather than stepping away from uncertainty they leaned into it, they would have become a more transformed and generous people rather than for a whole generation to die before the next generation would have a new imagination for the courageous journey forward?

Have empathy for one another’s trials. Remember that God is always and unwaveringly for us and our doubts are a part of that discovery. Those are the first two points of reflection on today’s Scripture. I bring you one more point to consider, that is this: If we learn to persevere, our trials can teach us how to live our lives, regardless of circumstances, as though we lack nothing.

C. Learn to live as if we lack nothing.

1. James wrote what I believe is the centerpiece of James chapter one:

⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

James 1:4. NIV

James wrote this knowing that there were no simple solutions to the trials that they faced in first century Jerusalem and across the Roman Empire. That was particularly true because of their economic poverty and religious persecution that was upon them. His small Christian community was continually squeezed between the violent and oppressive power of the Roman government and the violent and persecuting presence of the religious aristocracy and zealots in Jerusalem. The Christian Church was considered secular by Roman standards because they did not believe in the Roman God temple structure and they were considered blasphemous by traditional Jewish religion standards because they believed that Jesus was the long promised Messiah and Son of God.

2. In the middle of such intense pressures James said: “Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything”.⁷ There may have been some members of their community that felt that lack of money and political power was their biggest problem. James took that notion on by warning that money is fleeting and typically masques the deeper meaning of our human existence. Instead of money or power, James challenged Christ followers to focus their faith in an unswerving manner toward God and God’s all-encompassing love so they would deepen their capacity to look *through* their trials to freedom infused and hope-filled outcomes that would mean something beyond even the span of their own individual lives.
3. What I need to say now will raise questions about what and how we define the benefits of endurance. Contrary to what some teach in Christian religion, following Christ and letting perseverance finish its work doesn’t always lead to happy outcomes. Sometimes it invites more personal trials than if we had never decided to follow or be as generous as Christ. We could talk about famous and courageous Christians within the past century such as Martin Luther King Jr in the Protestant Tradition⁸ or Oscar Romero in the Catholic Tradition.⁹ But, James’ story is telling in itself.

Early Church historians record that religious zealots were frustrated that they couldn’t touch the Apostle Paul (whom they really wanted dead) because he always had a Roman guard. So, they turned their sites on James, the most visible Jewish Christian leader in Jerusalem. Eventually, James was confronted by the Jewish aristocracy of Jerusalem and in the midst of a mob, faced demands to recant his belief in Jesus Christ. He refused and though a dignified and learned person in Jewish tradition and a loved leader of the Jerusalem Christian Church, he was thrown down from the pinnacle of the temple and beaten to death with a club.¹⁰

⁷ James 4:2.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King_Jr. (accessed 9-15-18)

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%93scar_Romero (accessed 9-15-18)

¹⁰ Scot McKnight. The Letter of James (Kindle Locations 440-451). Kindle Edition.

So, why preach a sermon about endurance having benefits or believe that perseverance will help us to learn to live as if we have need of nothing, if in fact such beliefs and action may bring us more trials and personal harm?

Conclusion

1. At this point I need to point out the connection between having a mature, and complete faith that lives free to love *and lacks nothing* and the cost that sometimes comes with such freedom to love. Returning to our heroes on the podium at the 1968 summer Olympics...



...we see our two heroes and there is one other person on the podium—Australian sprinter Peter Norman. He is standing motionless on the second step of the medal podium, and often considered a random presence, an extra in Carlos' and Smith' moment, or a kind of intruder. Maybe even an icy sort of opposition to their message. But, that is not true.

After the race and before the medal stand the two Americans asked Norman if he believed in human rights. Norman said he did. They asked him if he believed in God, and he said he believe strongly in God and that he would stand in solidarity with them by wearing the same “Olympic Project for Human Rights” badge on their chests.



2. There was a discussion about the one pair of gloves symbolic of the Black Panthers and it was Norman's suggestion that they split the pair with one each. Can you feel the intensity of this moment? How quickly things were happening and how they were collaborating in a very on the spot moment? And, when the medal ceremony was over, like what Carlos and Smith experienced

back in America—Norman's single action of wearing that emblem and collaborating amongst the three of them cost Peter Norman everything as well. The 1960's change resistant, colonized Australia, treated him like an outsider, his family—like an outcast, with work being impossible to find. And, remarkably, in the spirit of James standing in front of his first century religious trial, Norman had one chance to save himself: he was invited to condemn his co-athletes in exchange for a pardon from the system that ostracized him. (Do any of you remember what he did?) He refused.

3. Norman struggled to fit into his specific cultural identity for the rest of his life and died of a heart attack in 2006 at the age of 64. So, what was the benefit of *his* endurance? James' endurance? Or, anyone's endurance who stand up for what is right and true, and yet face incredible loss for their act of love?

The benefit is true freedom. Freedom to love everyone—which is true freedom to lack nothing because when you love completely, you lack nothing entirely.

4. At Norman's funeral Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the two heroes we started with in the beginning of the sermon, who had become lifelong friends with Norman...



...were his lead pallbearers, sending him off as one of the three heroes of the moment. It was Carlos recalled the moment between the race and the medal ceremony where he said that he fully expected to see fear in Norman's eyes. And, he didn't. He said he saw love.

5. In 2012 the Australian Parliament issued an apology to Norman posthumously, a major motion picture was made of his life, and there has been a long litany of tributes that Peter Norman had never known before passing through the veil. But, all such accolades pale in comparison with him being free to love and going through personal trials that only deepened his resolve to know that personal freedom to the end.

That is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that is what will make us mature and complete, lacking nothing.

Prayer

God of all, in all, and for all—teach us, show us, lead us in the way of true and complete love for everyone. Help us in our many trials to not become bitter, but to become better lovers of you, others and ourselves. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who is our model and through the Spirit who gives us the strength to love. Amen.

Benediction

As our week begins, may we have empathy for one another's trials, remember that God is always and unwaveringly for us, and to learn that persevering through trials can teach us how to live our lives, regardless of circumstances, as though we lack nothing.

Go in peace. Amen.