

That You Might be Perfect

James 1:1-18

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. 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. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. 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.

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. 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. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. 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. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

I. Introduction

This is the last sermon in this series on the purpose of trials. We have tried to closely examine the thesis of James and of the rest of the New Testament that trials are a cause for joy because they teach us perseverance or endurance and endurance is necessary to our perfection. We have approached this subject by trying to clearly understand what James means by each of his

four key terms: “joy”, “trials”, “endurance”, and perfection. We have insisted upon the fact that we cannot appreciate what he is saying if we do not understand his terms in the same way he does. All four of these key words could be subject to misunderstanding. Therefore, we have taken the time to try to give a clear picture of each. We have taken them in the order in which they occur in the text. We began with joy. We saw that joy in the New Testament is never simply pleasure. We saw, furthermore, that it is a gift of God that comes from God and from the knowledge that God is at work in our lives. Secondly, we looked at trials. We established that there is a difference between trials and temptations. Both are tests, but they come from different sources, have different objectives and require different reactions on our part. We can take joy in trials because, difficult though they may be, they are allowed by God to teach us endurance so that we may reach perfection. Thirdly, we considered endurance. We saw first of all that it is better to translate this word by a more active word like endurance, than a more passive word like patience. This is true because what is required of us in the time of trial is not just a passive waiting for it to pass, but an active seeking of God’s wisdom so that we might navigate our way through it. Finally, we come today to the word “perfect”. All of the rest depends on our understanding of this word because the goal of trials is to teach us endurance, and the result of our enduring is that we might be “perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

This word speaks to the goal of trials. Remember when we talked about trials and we saw that the difference between a trial and a temptation was that a temptation aimed at our destruction while a trial aimed at our perfection. So what does it mean to be “perfect and complete, lacking nothing?” And how do trials contribute to our becoming perfect? These are the two questions that we are going to try to answer.

I. The Meaning of “Perfect”

Anytime anyone tries to apply the word perfect to us or imply that we should be perfect, we tend to draw back. Most likely, the most frequently used saying in the English language about perfection is: “Nobody’s perfect”. We understand perfection in the moral sense as without sin, and we have been taught, and correctly so, that moral perfection in this life is impossible. We are sinners, and we will always be sinners, so isn’t it futile to exhort us to be perfect. Or someone might say: “if God’s uses trials to make me perfect, I should get ready for lots of trials, because I will never be perfect.”

Allow me to begin by saying that the word that is translated “perfect” in this text has a different field of reference than our English word “perfect”. Its basic meaning is to reach an established goal. It is an active word that presupposes development. For example it could be used of an adult in comparison to an infant or a child. Physically the goal of human life is to become a fully

developed human being. In this sense the adult is the perfection of the child. This is the reason the New Testament often uses this image of spiritual development. Just as we go through stages of development physically, so also spiritually. To be perfect is to be spiritually grown up or adult. This is the reason that some translations substitute “mature” for perfect in passages like our text.

There is an interesting use of the verbal form of the word in the text we have read. James says in speaking of temptation that each person “is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” The word that is translated here “fully grown” or in the King James Version “finished” is the verbal form of the word “perfected”. In other words the “perfection” of sin is death. The goal that it aims at is or destruction and when we have been destroyed it has achieved its work.

I hope you are beginning to form a clear image of what we are getting at. God has established a goal for the Christian life. We come into it as spiritual infants, but we are expected to grow up, to become mature believers capable of dealing with life and whatever life presents to us in a Christ like way. Many New Testament passages speak of the process of spiritual maturity or growing up, but perhaps the most vivid is in Ephesians 4 where Paul writes:

“He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:10-16).

It is worth summarizing what he says here. First, he says that as a part of his work Christ established the Church and gave gifted individuals to the church as examples, leaders, and teachers in order that all of us might be equipped for ministry. As we are, this will result in the entire body of Christ being built up. He then describes the results of the growing up or maturing process. He says:

- That we all will attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God

- To mature manhood (This is the same as what James means by perfection)
- To the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (In a nutshell this is what mature manhood looks like)

The result of this maturity is that:

- We will no longer be children
- Blown around by every wind of teaching that comes along
- But in every way we will become like Christ in the way we relate to one another
- So that the Church becomes a place where love reigns and grows

So to be perfect is to be neither sinless nor flawless, but to be adult. To be spiritually adult is to act in a Christ like way; to handle life a Christ would handle it.

II. How Trials Help

To understand how trials help, let me use another saying with the word perfect: “practice makes perfect.” The way we learn to do most things is by doing, and in learning to do most anything there is a time where the learning process becomes a trial, but if we endure the trial we eventually reach the goal of the instruction and become competent at the thing we are trying to learn.

The thing that stands out most in my own experience is learning to speak French. There was a moment that it became such a trial that I seriously questioned whether it was worth the effort, but I kept enduring until the day came that I could have an hour long conversation without being asked to repeat anything, or having the person with whom I was speaking repeat themselves. Did I speak perfect French? No, far from it, but I had reached the goal of being able to freely communicate in French. Could I have achieved that goal without going through the trials and the humiliation that I went through getting there? No. Now I laugh at some of those trials, and take joy in them, even though at the time they were painful. I take joy in them, because through them I achieved the goal that I had set.

In the case of our spiritual development the goal is spiritual adulthood, being able to deal with all of the difficulties of life from the perspective of Christ. Are the trials that we go through in the process of arriving at the goal pleasant? Oftentimes not, but they are necessary. This is why once we have learned the lesson, we can look back on them with joy, because we see that without them we would never have achieved the ability to handle life that we have.

