

Count It All Joy
James 1:1-12

Count it all joy – that’s what James says. So, what brings you joy? What makes you happy? A hunting or fishing trip with your sweetheart? A motorcycle ride with good friends? Seeing family members after a long absence? Holding your grandchild in your arms? Many of our happiest moments have to do with being with the people we love.

Of course, if we took all those TV commercials seriously, we might believe that joy comes from possessions – all we need is the right car, or the right clothes, or the right soft drink to be happy. And many of us do spend years working to earn enough money so that we can retire, and do all those things that we didn’t have time for during our careers. In one way or another, we often associate happiness with material blessings.

So, what’s the the most important thing to James? Not possessions – no, in verses 10 and 11, he encourages us to keep our material blessings in the proper perspective, because no human wealth lasts forever. A quick trip out to the ruins of Windsor makes that point abundantly clear, doesn’t it? And however unpleasant the thought may be, the fact is that our lives on this earth aren’t any more permanent than our possessions. Just as the grass is withered by the sun, and just as the flowers fade and fall, so we and all our loved ones will eventually pass from this life, along with so many of the other things that we hold dear.

But James points out that there is something more permanent, something more worthy of our focus and our attention, something in which both rich and poor can rejoice, can glory in and can boast about. For there is a way in which all the poor are exalted, and in the same way all the rich are humbled and brought low. And that is our relationship to Jesus.

For we cannot doubt that as each one of us is joined to the Lord Jesus Christ by faith, we are humbled as we contemplate the great price He paid for the forgiveness of our sins. We are all humbled as we remember that our sinful selves have died with Christ, having been crucified with Him.

But at the same time, as each one of us is joined to Christ by faith, we are also risen with Him to newness of life, and we are seated with Him in the heavenly places. In Christ, we have received much more than earthly riches – we have been adopted as sons and daughters of God, along with all our loved ones who also believe in Him.

And so while material blessings and human relationships can bring us some happiness in this world, James reminds us that, for all those who trust in Christ, our spiritual blessings are far more meaningful, and far more permanent.

Okay, so what else makes you happy? I don't know about you, but I tend to be a lot more content when things in life go smoothly, the way I think they should. And maybe that's the sort of thing that makes you happy too – when your team scores the winning touchdown, or when you have a good hand at bridge, or when the golfball goes as far as you want it to in the right direction. Life is always more pleasant when we are able to complete our tasks successfully and when everyone is working together on the same page.

But once again, James challenges this kind of thinking. In verse 2 he says that we should instead count it all joy when we encounter the various trials of life. He repeats this idea in verse 12, when he says that we are blessed when we endure temptations.

Blessed? The word in Greek means fortunate, privileged and even happy. But how can we be happy and privileged to suffer trials and temptations? How can that be right?

Well, we might not understand it, but we can't deny that that's the same sort of thing Jesus told us in the Beatitudes we read responsively this morning. He even used the same Greek word: blessed. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Like James, Jesus turns our normal notions of happiness and prosperity upside down.

How can any of this make sense? Well, it doesn't if we look at things from a purely worldly perspective, a point of view that insists on having our own way and getting what we want right now. But James wants us to take the long view. He's already told us that we shouldn't put too much stock in the things and the relationships of this world. Now, he tells us that we should rejoice even when we undergo trials because it is during the times when our faith in Christ is tested that our patience, our steadfast endurance grows. It's not the easy times but the tough times that make us more perfect and entire, more mature and complete and whole.

And so while we should thank God for the times in life when things go smoothly, perhaps we should thank Him even more for the difficult times, the confusing times, the scary times when we have no choice but to trust Him and to cry out to Him. For it is in those dark times when we tend to draw ever closer to the One Who is conforming us day by day into the likeness of His crucified Son.

What else makes you happy? I suppose we Evangelical Presbyterians would have to include understanding what's going on in the world around us. After all, we belong to a denomination that is explicitly rooted in the infallibility of the Scriptures and grounded upon the timeless Biblical truths set forth for us in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms.

The heritage of the Protestant Reformation includes the foundation of most of the great institutions of learning the world has ever known. We are most content when we know what's going on.

But once again, James challenges us to focus, not just on knowledge of the truth, but upon wisdom. Remember, in verse 1 we learn that James is writing to the twelve tribes, to Jewish believers in Christ. In their tradition, wisdom means much more than book learning. In the Hebrew understanding, wisdom is knowledge of the truth which is applied in life. Education alone isn't enough – it is only truth that is put into practice that is true wisdom.

Can we be honest? We Presbyterians tend to focus a lot more on education than we do on application, don't we? Why is that? Why aren't we more actively involved in mercy ministries and evangelism? Now, it could be because of what we know. After all, we believe that God saves sinners by His grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and so we Calvinists are often tempted to complacency. We are often tempted to rest in the sovereignty of God to save us and others, instead of aggressively pursuing foreign missions and evangelism. We are even sometimes tempted to presume upon the grace of God instead of aggressively seeking to put the remnants of sin to death in our lives.

Yes, in the Westminster Standards we have all our theological ducks in a row, with everything done decently and in order. But unless we get those Biblical truths off of the page and put them into practice in our lives, they won't do us or others any good. It turns out that we Presbyterians don't just need knowledge – we need wisdom.

But sometimes it's hard to figure out how we should apply Biblical truths in our lives, isn't it? We know we are supposed to love our neighbors and even our enemies, but how do we build relationships with people who just aren't interested? We are surrounded by the poor, but how can we know who is truly needy? And how can we help the needy without enabling them to continue in the unbiblical practices that may have gotten them into trouble in the first place? The world is full of needs and our resources are very limited – how can we best use our time, our talents, and our treasure for the glory of God right here, right now?

That's the sort of thing that a study of the book of James can help us with. For this is an immensely practical book, talking about all sorts of ethical problems Christians face in many areas of life. James will help us sort out how to put shoes on our faith – how to love God in our everyday lives, and what it really means to love our neighbors as ourselves, not just in the abstract, but here and now. James will help us learn how to live out what the Bible teaches.

So, how can we pursue both knowledge and the application of that knowledge? How can we find true wisdom? Well, even though he's going to spend the rest of this book talking about

exactly that subject, in verse 5, James places the emphasis not on study but on prayer. That's because it is God Who alone is the true source of wisdom. It is God alone Who can help us to understand His Word rightly, and it is God alone Who by the power of the Holy Spirit can help us to live out the truth of His Word in the face of all the different and sometimes conflicting demands on us.

But James promises that those who truly seek wisdom from God will find it. In verse 5, he reminds us that God gives liberally, freely to those who ask Him. He does not upbraid, He does not reproach those who come to Him confessing our ignorance and our confusion. Instead, James echoes the words of Jesus, Who promised that if we would ask, God would give us what we need.

But we need to ask in faith, don't we? We need to trust God to keep His promise to guide us as a good shepherd guides his sheep. Just as we know salvation comes to those who are truly trusting in Christ, so James reminds us that God's blessings come to those who really believe that God will do what He says. Asking God for wisdom and guidance, all the while continuing to worry about what we should do is to ride an emotional roller coaster, isn't it? James describes this sort of vacillation as being on a storm-tossed ship at sea, and who wants that sort of instability in their lives?

So, yes, we should give thanks not only for our material blessings, but for the even greater spiritual blessings we have by faith in Christ. We should give thanks not only for the good times, but for the tough times in life that strengthen our faith in Christ. And we should give thanks that as we trust in Jesus every day, He gives us true wisdom – not only the knowledge of His will, but the ability to put it into practice in our lives. We should give thanks that in all these ways, Christ Himself is the solid rock on which we can find refuge from the storm-tossed seas of life.

But because of our connection to Christ, we can look forward to even greater happiness in the future. In verse 12 James says that God has promised a crown of life to those who love Him. It should be a great comfort to know that the suffering and the confusion of this life will one day pass away, and that the temporary joys of this world will be replaced by the eternal favor of our Lord. We should look forward to the day of Christ's return with eager anticipation.

But the good news is that our greatest reward, this crown of life, can be ours right now. For as we place our minds on spiritual things instead of worldly things, as we endure temptations, growing in our patience and our trust in Christ, as we seek true wisdom from Him, learning more of His Word and applying it in our daily lives, we are drawing closer to Christ, the One we love. And the more we live our lives in Christ, and the more Christ lives His life through us, the crown of eternal life is ours today.

So let's expand our ideas of what it means to be truly blessed, to be truly happy. Let's rejoice in whatever draws us closer to Christ. As we abide in Christ and as Christ abides in us, let's truly count it all joy.