

ATTITUDE DETERMINES ALTITUDE

As I was preparing my lesson for this morning, I remembered something that Abraham Lincoln is reported to have said. He said, *“Most people are about as happy as they choose to be.”* Do you think that is true? Among the books in my library, there is one on the subject of depression entitled, *Happiness Is a Choice*, which is pretty much what Lincoln said, isn't it? If that is true, that happiness is a choice, then when you think about your own happiness and contentment, if you recognize that you are really not very happy, do you think maybe it's because you've chosen not to be? Minister and author, John Maxwell says, *“The greatest day in your life and mine is when we take total responsibility for our attitudes. That's the day we truly grow up.”*

A number of people have recognized the same truth, that the attitudes we choose to live with make all the difference in the kind and quality of life we live.

- **Thomas Jefferson** said, *“Nothing can stop the man with the right mental attitude from achieving his goal; nothing on earth can help the man with the wrong mental attitude.”*
- **Winston Churchill** said, *“Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference.”*
- **W. Clement Stone** said, *“There is little difference in people, but that little difference makes a big difference. The little difference is attitude. The difference is whether it is positive or negative.”*
- **Viktor Frankl**, a survivor of the Jewish Concentration Camps, said this: *“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”*
- **Charles Swindoll**, author and minister said, *“We cannot change our past. We cannot change the fact that people act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude.”*
- **Brian Tracy**, well-known motivational speaker said, *“You cannot control what happens to you, but you can control your attitude toward what happens to you, and in that, you will be mastering change rather than allowing it to master you.”*
- And this quote from **Zig Ziglar**, from which I took the title of this lesson, *“Your attitude, not your aptitude, will determine your altitude.”*

Attitude determines your altitude, and what I mean by that is whether you go through life flying high, or just crawling along is determined as much by your attitude as by anything else. I think an awful lot of people do not understand that and sometimes they get way, way down. That is why I appreciate so much the words of James found in **verses 2-4** in our reading assignment this week. If you have your Bibles, please open to the 1st chapter of James and let's look at that together.

After identifying who he, the writer, is, *“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,”* and identifying those to whom he is writing, *“the twelve tribes in the dispersion,”* he sends his *“greetings.”* He then writes what is a rather startling way to begin a letter, when you think about it. He says,

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3) for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4) And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Many years ago when I first really gave this passage any serious study, it changed my life. Because of what James wrote, I gained a whole new perspective about things, especially about those things that might be thought of as trials or troubles. What I want to do this morning is to open up these few verses with the hope that you will find it as helpful as I did many years ago.

First of all, notice that the subject James has introduced here is *“the testing of your faith.”* Of course our faith is being tested all of the time isn't it? Every day, as we go through the day, what we believe about God, what we believe about Christ and about the Bible and Christianity is put to the test. Often we are not aware that our faith is being tested, but at other times, we can feel Satan breathing down our backs!

But notice too that James tells us, strangely it may seem, that we are to *“count it all joy...when we meet trials of various kinds.”* That's the English Standard Version.

- The KJV has, *“count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations”*
- The ASV gives it as, *“count it all joy, my brethren, when ye fall into manifold temptations”*
- The NASV has *“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials”*
- In the NIV, we read, *“Consider it pure joy, my brother, whenever you face trials of many kinds”*
- The NKJV renders it as, *“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials”*
- And the RSV gives us, *“Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials”*

While there are some slight differences it is interesting that all of those translations agree that the attitude one is to have when experiencing trials of every kind is that of joy. All except the Message version which is more of a paraphrase than a translation. The Message puts it this way, which I think really captures the meaning. *“Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides.”*

So, the subject is the testing of your faith, and the attitude that James wants us to have or to develop when these times of testing come is one of joy. How can one be joyful in the midst of a trial and why he or she should have that attitude is the purpose for this lesson.

Let's deal first of all with the idea of *trials*. It is a translation of the Greek word *periosmos*. Most of the time, that word is translated as *temptation*. It is however, also used in the sense of a trial. The older translations such as the KJV and ASV kept the idea of temptation in this passage, while most of the newer translations went with the idea of a trial. What we need to understand is that both ideas are valid and useful and both ideas are inherent in the Greek word. That is because in every temptation there is a trial, and in every trial there is a temptation.

You see, every temptation is a trial in which our faith and confession is being examined or tested. This can be seen, for example, in **2 Corinthians 13:5** where Paul uses this same word—*periosmos*—when he writes, “*Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!*”

At the same time, in every trial there is a temptation to avail oneself of an ungodly means to get out from under the trial. Nobody likes trials and troubles in life, and it is instinctive for us to want to get out from under every trial as soon as possible. The trouble comes when we are tempted into choosing a way out that is not the way God would have us to do it.

Think about the temptations of Jesus. They began with a trial, didn't they? He had gone 40 days without eating, and by the time Satan comes to him, he has to be in the beginning stages of dying from hunger. So what is the first temptation the Devil proposes? He taunted Jesus, saying, “*If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread.*” Now there is nothing inherently sinful about turning stones into bread, assuming one has the ability to do that, but Jesus knew that it was the Holy Spirit that had led him into this wilderness. He also knew that the way he would prove that he was the Son of God was not by some miracle to save his own life. God had a much greater plan in mind for that!

So whether you take the idea of temptation or of trial, it is the same. It may be a trial under which you are being knocked down by one thing after another. It may be a loss that just knocks the props out from under you. It may be a challenge that comes to you in a way that you never expected, or from someone you would have never expected. Or it may be almost the opposite. You may be faced with more wealth and opportunity than a thousand people enjoy in a lifetime. What temptations may come with all of that that will put your faith on trial? It may be a temptation to fulfil some desire, or lust that wells up within you. James had more to say about that in verses 13-15, didn't he? In either case, trial or temptation, both come as a test to your faith.

Such trials and temptations can come to you from any direction and at any times. In fact, James uses an interesting word there in verse 2 when he says, “*when you meet trials of various kinds.*” That word *meet*, or *fall into* as it is translated in the KJV and ASV and NKJV, or *encounter*, or *face* as it is given in some of the other translations is from a Greek word that is used only three times in the New Testament. It is used once in **Luke 10** in the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. In **verse 30**, Jesus said, “*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers.*” The word “fell” is the same word that James used in verse 2, when you *fall into temptations*, or *encounter various trials*. But do you get the picture? This man going along his way when all of a sudden he is confronted by a band of robbers. Perhaps they literally jumped on him, causing him to fall on the ground. And then they proceeded to beat him almost to death.

The second place where this word is used is in **Acts 27:41** where we find the apostle Paul on a ship on his way to Rome as a prisoner. The ship encountered a fierce storm, and for two weeks

it was pounded by that storm, **Verse 41** says, *“But striking a reel, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained unmovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf.”* That word “striking” is that same word James used in 1:2 when he spoke about falling into, or encountering, or meeting trials of every kind.

So James is not just talking about run-of-the-mill type stuff that happens to us. He is talking about situations like when you are going along, minding your own business and suddenly the sky falls in on you, or you are sailing along through life and suddenly you run into a storm and it begins to pound you relentlessly, and the bottom drops out! That’s the way life is, isn’t it? (Ask Dean Garroutte about that! Things happen and when they do, your faith gets tested).

All right then, listen again to what God says about times like these. What kind of attitude are we to have when these things happen to us? James says:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3) for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4) And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

James says, *“Count it all joy.”* The NASV and NIV tell us to *“consider it all joy”* but I like that idea of counting. We sometimes sing the song, “Count Your Many Blessings” (name them one by one.) But James would have us count something else. He would have us count our trials and temptations as well. Of course he is not just wanting us to keep a list of them. He wants us to reflect on them; to seriously stop and think about what might be going on in our life.

And he wants us to have a joyful attitude towards those things; not a pessimistic attitude, not a negative, downcast, or depressed attitude, but an attitude of joy. *“Count it all joy,”* James says! Now that is what God wants you to do, do you understand? That is how you obey God. In the same way that He wants you to be baptized, and in the same way that He wants you to be holy, and in the same that He wants you to worship Him in spirit and in truth, He wants you to *“Count it all joy when tests and challenges come at you from all sides!”*

Now, we realize that this kind of attitude is not the way that people typically respond to trials and temptations. And we also realize that if we adopt this kind of an attitude, people might begin to think we are a little strange! And we are! We should be different! Christians ought to handle things differently than people who have not obeyed the gospel. Didn’t Paul tell the Thessalonians regarding the passing of their loved ones, *“I do not want you to grieve as do those others who have no hope?”*

Yes, Christians are different, and the difference is not just in the things that we do or don’t do. One of the big differences is in the attitudes we are to have as we go through life.

But someone might say, *“That doesn’t make sense! How can one be happy when their faith is being tested by a trial or being tempted in some way?”* That is a good question, and as we read last week in **Hebrews 12:11**: *“For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than*

pleasant.” The apostle Peter said something similar when he wrote about the hope of salvation that gives Christians reasons to rejoice, and then he goes on to say, *“though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials,”* (1 Peter 1:6).

So, yes, Christians are not blind to the fact that they are undergoing a real trial, or test to their faith. They are not Pollyanna about it, and in fact, James does not use the word happy in this passage. He uses the word joy. They are not the same thing. One can have great joy and still be unhappy. Happiness is the emotion caused by what is happening at any given moment. In the midst of great sorrow, for example, there can still be something happen that causes you to laugh. And in the midst of great levity, there can also be something that makes us sad.

Well James knows that, and God, who made our emotions, certainly understands that. But in the same way that **Hebrews 12:2** speaks about Jesus, *“who for the joy set before him endured the cross,”* every trial of ours, and even every temptation, can be counted with joy because we know that something good can come from it. My version says it *“produces steadfastness.”* Other versions give us words like *“patience,”* or *“endurance,”* or *“perseverance.”* The Greek word is *hupomone*, which is a compound word which literally means to *“remain under.”* Patience is not simply waiting. Patience is enduring some unpleasant or unfavorable situation without saying or doing the wrong thing. Perseverance is pushing on, not being stopped or deterred even when it is hard. Steadfastness means not giving up, being steady as you push on.

We need those qualities, don’t we? Everyone needs them, not just Christians, but James is telling us how we get them. They don’t come in a kit our parents received when they carried us home from the hospital. James says they come from facing trials that come to us from every direction. They come when we respond to the testing of our faith with a godly attitude, which is one of joy, which is ours because we know that our ability to be patient, to endure, to persevere and be steadfast is going to be stronger.

Well, why is that important? What’s the value of being more patient, of having greater endurance, or being more steadfast? Well, think about this for a moment: What is likely going to happen to those whose patience is too thin, who are unable to endure, who fail at being steadfast? Likely they are going to give up and give in, aren’t they? They are going to quit and that would be a great mistake because if they didn’t quit, if they persevered and stayed in the race, look at what God has in mind for them. Look at **verse 4** of our text: *“And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”* I like the way James put it in **verse 12**. He said: *“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.”*

Do you understand? Are you getting the picture of what God is trying to do with you, even when he allows your faith to be tested? He is trying to perfect you and complete you, so that you will not lack anything that would be good for you!

That's what He wants for you, to bless you in every way and bring you home in one piece. There is a reason why counselors and psychologists speak about people "falling apart," having "split personalities," and why we sometimes speak about people having "mental breakdowns," or being "broken hearted," "cracked up," or becoming "unhinged!"

God is trying to get us through this experience we call life in one piece. His desire is for you to be everything you are capable of being. But that won't happen, and it can't happen if every time we get into a situation where our faith is being tested, we call it quits!

Remember what we said at the beginning of this lesson: "Attitude determine altitude!" So, if you want to make it to heaven, if you want to soar to those heights, then you need to develop the attitude of joy, even when your faith is being tested. As Vince Lombardi is credited with saying, "*Quitters never win, and winners never quit.*" One of the ways you can keep from becoming a quitter is to learn how to go through every trial, and face every temptation; that you will do that with joy, knowing that with every passing trial, you will grow stronger and stronger.

Now, in closing, did you notice in verse 2, James wrote these things to those who were already brothers, or brethren in Christ. In other words, he was writing to people who had already made the decision to be a Christian. Have you made that decision? You cannot quit the race if you never enter it, and so this morning we want to close by encouraging you to get your life of faith underway. We cannot guarantee that your faith will not be tested but we can assure you of the results if you do not give up. If you want to make that commitment this morning, or if you need to make a recommitment this morning, will you please come while we stand and sing together