

## ***“Authentic: The Joy of Trouble”***

*James 1:1-12 • Proverbs 2:1-15*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • March 12, 2017

This morning we’re starting a new series we’re calling “Authentic.” This will be a 12-week study on the New Testament book of James. One of the things I love about the book of James is that it is direct, easy to understand, and incredibly practical. This book addresses all kinds of issues that you and I face today as followers of Jesus, things like money, worldliness, planning, prayer, illness, trials, justice, and even the way we talk to people. As one author put it, “James shows us how to have a living, visible, productive faith in a fallen world.” Most of all, James shows us how to have an authentic Christian faith. And that’s exactly what we’re aiming for over the next few weeks.

What do we mean by authentic? The government goes to great length to prevent counterfeiting of our money. They use special paper and ink and there are all kinds of security features incorporated into the bills. You’ve probably seen in some of the stores that they use a special pen to test your bills to make sure they’re genuine. The Treasury Department does all of that to guarantee that the bills are authentic. They’re not the only ones, though. For diamonds, stamps, coins, almost anything collectible of value, there are people who will carefully inspect and certify that the item is authentic. When you buy your complete set of commemorative Elvis Presley plates from the Franklin Mint, what do you get? A certificate of authenticity. They’re the real deal.

Well the book of James helps us to see if our faith is authentic. Over the next 12 weeks we’re going to see what authentic faith looks like and how we can strengthen our faith. But as we do that, let me just point out a couple of ground rules. First, we’re only talking about *your* faith, not anyone else’s. You can’t use these Scriptures to suggest that someone else does not have a saving faith in Christ. Second, James is not writing a list of rules to be followed. He’s showing us the evidence of authentic faith. He even says that we are unable keep all the rules.

So we depend on God’s grace, which is what faith in Jesus is all about.

A little background on this book will be helpful for us as we go through this study. The first thing we want to know is who wrote it and why. Obviously it was written by James, but which James? There are only three people named James mentioned in the New Testament. According to Acts 12, James, the brother of John and a disciple of Jesus, was martyred very early by Herod. The second James, the son of Alphaeus, is only mentioned a couple of times and we have no details about him. That leaves James, the younger brother of Jesus.

We know that this James was very skeptical of Jesus during his life. At one point the whole family tried to take Jesus away, claiming he had lost his mind. At another point they mocked the miracles Jesus was performing. But something obviously happened. Later in the New Testament we find that James not only believes in Jesus but he’s become the leader of the church in Jerusalem! So what happened? Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15: “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. *Then he appeared to James*, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” Jesus visited James after his resurrection and it changed James forever.

After his introduction, James begins his letter by saying, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.” Anybody ever have a difficult season in life? Of course. We all do. Life is not painless and being a Christian doesn’t magically make it easy,

despite what some television preachers try to tell you. The thing is that none of us, when we're going through some difficulty, will be happy about it. So when we read verse 2: "count it all *joy* when you meet trials of various kinds," we think that doesn't make any sense. Why would God want us to be happy about getting sick or losing my job?

That misses the point. God's not telling us to be happy about those things. Instead, the trials of life, according to James, reveal what's on the inside. The way you and I react to the things that are happening in our lives exposes what's in our hearts. The question, then, is when that difficult season of life comes how do I respond? I don't know about you but I think a lot of times my initial response is, "why is God doing this to me? What did I do to deserve this?" My response is negative. James is saying that during hard times I should still have joy. It's important to point out that joy is not the same thing as happiness. I don't have to be happy about the circumstances but I can still have the joy that comes from a close relationship with Jesus.

This is why James goes on to say that life's trials test our faith. When we face those times will we respond with joy that comes from faith or will we respond with anger? Verse 3 says, "you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." Another word for steadfastness is endurance. One of the reasons God allows difficulties in our life is to produce endurance.

Marathon runners require an amazing amount of endurance to run 26.2 miles. You don't just wake up one day and say, "I think I'll enter the marathon next week." You have to train. You have to train a lot. You have to run and run and run, pushing yourself to run farther and faster each time. That's the only way to build up the endurance you need to compete. James is saying that the trials in life have the same effect if we allow them. They produce endurance. Every time our faith is tested is an opportunity for our faith to grow stronger. God is training us for eternity with

Him. As James says, "let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

By the way, when he says "that you may be perfect," he's not talking about being flawless. Perfection here has the sense of being who you were designed to be. For example, I was replacing a section of fence and a gate in my yard recently and I bought a box of screws to put the whole thing together. But these screws weren't your typical screws with either a straight or Phillips head. They had a star-shaped head that required a special tool to install them. Thankfully the box included the tool. Now I'm sure that if you put that little tool under a microscope you would see all kinds of tiny defects in the metal. It's not perfect in the sense of being without any flaws. But it *is* perfect in the sense that it is exactly the tool needed to drive those screws. It's the perfect tool for the job. The trials of life can produce endurance that will help us to be complete and perfect, lacking nothing for God's Kingdom.

One of the key things that we often lack that trials can help us gain is wisdom. Verse 5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." Wisdom is so much more than just knowledge. Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit and not a vegetable. Wisdom is having the sense not to put it in a fruit salad. Wisdom is really about understanding for living. It's the practical use of knowledge. It takes wisdom to grasp the truths of God and understand how they apply to your life. As we see here, wisdom is a gift from God. The point here is that when we are experiencing tough times we need to ask God for wisdom so we can grow from our circumstances. And when we ask God gives that wisdom generously.

The next few verses, though, can seem kind of troubling. "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-

mindful man, unstable in all his ways.” When I first read that I immediately wonder if I have enough faith. Sometimes I have doubts. Anybody else sometimes wrestle with doubts about God? The good news is that it’s okay to wrestle honestly with doubts. In fact, there wouldn’t be faith without doubts. If you knew with absolute certainty you wouldn’t need faith. So what is James saying here?

The issue is about asking God for wisdom to learn from your troubles. James is talking about asking but not trusting God. We were discussing this in Sunday School last week and I said that this kind of doubting would be like me inviting you to come for dinner at my house. You say, “That sounds like fun. What can I bring?” and I ask you to bring the bread. But then I doubt you will actually bring bread and so I go get bread myself. When you arrive at my house with bread you will probably be offended that I didn’t trust you to bring the bread even though I asked.

James says that it’s the same thing if you ask God for wisdom but then depend on your own resources and knowledge instead of trusting God for His wisdom. James goes on to specifically warn people who have resources not to trust in their money because everyone has the same standing before God.

Our passage ends with verse 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.” Authentic faith is faith that trusts God in good times in bad. Authentic faith is asking God for the wisdom to learn from our trials without doubting that He will give it. Authentic faith is remaining steadfast under trial. Authentic faith shows up as joy.

*Amen.*