

## ***“Authentic: Blame Game”***

*James 1:12-18 • Exodus 16:2-12*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • March 19, 2017

Last week we started this new sermon series called “Authentic.” It’s a study of the book of James, which is such a practical, easy to understand book. What James teaches us is really how to live an authentic Christian life. One of the questions you might want to ask yourself is this: “if Christianity were illegal would there be enough evidence to convict you?” James shows us what that evidence looks like in real life.

In the first message we saw that James begins his letter saying, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.” We all encounter difficult times in life. Being a Christian doesn’t somehow eliminate all your problems. In fact, it can even make them worse. What’s important is the way we choose to respond to those challenges. James tells us that the trials of life tend to show who we are on the inside. The way you and I react to the things that are happening in our lives exposes what’s in our hearts.

What we learned last week is that the trials of life are opportunities for us to grow and strengthen our faith. Much like exercise can be painful but helps us develop muscles, difficulties can help us train for eternity. One of the ways our faith grows is by asking God for wisdom to discern the lessons that are available in the difficulty. When we respond this way we develop endurance or steadfastness. Verse 12 says, “Blessed is the person 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.”

So that’s one way we can respond to trials that test our faith. But that’s not the way some of us respond. The other way we can respond is to start blaming. When things aren’t going the way we want we start looking for someone to blame. Very early in life we learn to say, “It’s not my fault.” When things go badly we want to point the finger at someone else. It seems to make us feel better, I guess.

Actually, social scientists have done significant research in the area of blame. Brené Brown is a professor of Social Work at the University of Houston who studies human connection. Her 2010 TED Talk, *The Power of Vulnerability*, is one of the five most viewed TED talks ever. One of the things she has studied is blame. She says she started studying it because she discovered *she* was a blamer. She said it really hit home the day she dropped her coffee cup on the floor, splashing coffee on her white pants. Her immediate response, she says, was to blame her husband. He wasn’t even there. He was already at work that morning. But what Brené says is that in her mind he was to blame because the night before she had asked him to be home by 10 because she has trouble sleeping if he’s not there. He didn’t get home until 10:30. The next morning, since she wasn’t as well rested, she poured a second cup of coffee, which she ended up dropping on the floor. Do you see what she did? In her mind she was able to rationalize blaming him for her mistake.

How many of you do that? How quick are you to find someone to blame when you’re frustrated? Why do you do that? Brené says that we do that because it gives us some semblance of control. Listen to what she says about blame: “Blame is simply the discharging of discomfort and pain. It has an inverse relationship with accountability. Accountability by definition is a vulnerable process. It means me calling you and saying, ‘Hey my feelings were really hurt about this.’ And talking is not blaming. Blaming is simply a way that we discharge anger.”

Many times, in our search for someone to blame, we blame God. We doubt God’s goodness and distance ourselves from Him. James writes, “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.” One commentator says, “James

know that a test can be taken two ways. We can view it as a trial and turn to God for aid, so we persevere. Or we can read it as a tragedy, or as a senseless accident, or as a failure—on God’s part—to love and protect us. Worse yet, some who meet trials blame and attack God for them, accusing him of malice.”

Throughout the Bible we find stories of God’s people facing various trials or tests and responding in different ways. By the way, the Greek word for temptation is the same word translated as trials and it can also mean tests. Genesis 22 says that God tested Abraham when he asked him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. That was a test of faith, an opportunity for Abraham to demonstrate his authentic faith in God. And Abraham responded in faith.

In our reading from Exodus 16, God tests the Israelites in the wilderness. He has just rescued them from Egypt in a miraculous way about six weeks before and already they are complaining against God. They’re complaining about food. So God tells Moses, “Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not.” God told them only to gather as much as they needed for one day. Any extra they tried to store would go bad by the end of the day. The test was whether they would trust God to provide each day. Sadly, many of them failed this test. And they blamed. They blamed Moses and Aaron and they blamed God.

James knows our hearts and he knows our tendency to blame. So he tells us that we can’t blame God because God is perfect. God hates sin and therefore He cannot be tempted to sin and He is unable to tempt someone to sin. I think this passage also eliminates a favorite saying, “the devil made me do it.” Verse 14 shows us who is really to blame. “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by *his own desire*.” The hard truth is that you and I have within us everything we need to sin. It just comes naturally. Sin begins with desire and without Jesus stepping in to change us it

leads to death.

Thankfully Jesus does step in. James says, “Do not be deceived. 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.” The word of truth is the Word of God, which includes the written Word, the Bible, and the Living Word, Jesus himself. John’s gospel begins by calling the second person of the Trinity the Word. “In the beginning was the Word.” The written Word, from cover to cover, points us to Jesus, the Living Word.

James makes two points here. First, every good gift is from God because God is intrinsically good. We are all flawed and so we are unable to give good and perfect gifts. So if a gift is good and perfect it must come from God who is also good and perfect. The second point is closely related. Every gift God gives is good and perfect. He cannot give bad gifts. Ultimately, the point is that the most important good and perfect gift is the salvation, which James calls bringing us forth by the word of truth.” When the Word of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, makes us alive again, the Scriptures and even Jesus himself makes sense. The Bible comes alive in a way that just reading the words doesn’t. When you experience that kind of life change, you begin to see your troubles and trials as opportunities for growth and not for blame.

Dr. Brown reminds us that blaming is essentially expressed anger. While it may give you a momentary feeling of control, in the long run you end up with less control. She says, “People who blame a lot seldom have the tenacity and grit to actually hold people accountable. Because we’ve spent all of our energy raging for 15 seconds and figuring out whose fault something is. Blaming is very corrosive in relationships, and it’s one of the reasons we miss our opportunities for empathy.”

When you blame others for your troubles you are unleashing your anger on them. Instead of gaining control you actually lose the ability to have happy, healthy relationships. When you blame God you not only distance yourself from Him, missing out on the opportunity to grow in faith and endurance, you actually provide opportunities to sin.

But that's not who you are in Christ. Jesus lived and died and rose again so that you could

have a happy, healthy relationship with Him. So when the trials come, and they will come, remember that you have a choice in how you respond. One way leads to sin and death but the other way, if you remain steadfast, leads to the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. And that's the definition of "blessed."

*Amen.*