

Sermon Series: Wisdom that Works

#2 God's generosity in trials

James 1:12-18

Nicola McDermott is the first Aussie woman to **break the 2m high jump barrier**. On the day, McDermott travelled **no more than 10 metres** to make that historic run and jump and achieve her goal. Yet, her journey to that goal **took years** and years in reality. It involved sacrifice, discipline, and assistance from many others. She's a **living illustration** of **not giving up** and of **staying true** to reach your goal. **But what was it that kept her on course? What was her secret to staying true to reach her goal?**



The Apostle James is happy to reveal his "secrets" for Christians to remain **steadfast in their faith** in the Christian life, especially **when experiencing trials and tests**.¹ In chapter 1, verses 12-18 James gives **three important lessons** on staying the course of **following Jesus** even **when the going gets tough**. He tells us...

1. Where to **look** when enduring tests and trials v. 12
2. How to **think** when facing hardship vv. 13-15
3. **Who can help** when the going gets tough vv. 16-18

Successful athletes have two **key strategies** to endure hardship and reach their goal:

1/ they keep their **eye on the prize**, and



2/ they **welcome the encouragement and guidance of their coach**.



1. Keep your eyes on the prize (12)



James teaches that Christians too should keep their **eyes on the prize** to endure and not fall away, especially amidst trials for being a follower of Jesus.

¹ The Letter of James cycles through three key themes: trials in the Christian life, wisdom from God, and poverty and riches, with poverty and riches being the main emphasis in the middle section of the letter

Some of his original readers were **beginning to buckle** under pressure; considering giving **up on God** and even to **blaming God** for their circumstances.² But James writes in 1:12...

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. They have stood the test and will receive the **crown of life** promised to those who love the Lord.

James says: to endure in your faith, **keep your eyes on the prize.**

This proverbial statement reminds us of Jesus' words in Matthew chapter 5:

"Blessed (Happy) are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:10-12)

"**Blessed**" in the original Greek³ can be translated "**happy**" or fortunate. Jesus *and* James present a **counterintuitive** point of view: those who keep their eyes on **life's true prize** in tough times are the **truly happy ones.**

Jesus speaks of a "**reward**". The Apostle Paul pointed to a **prize.**⁴ And James refers to a "**crown of life**".⁵ Rather than a monarch's bejewelled gold headwear, or a shiny trophy, James pictures a **laurel wreath** given to victorious athletes in ancient Olympic games. But the "prize" Christians look forward to receiving is of **immeasurably greater worth** than the ring of leaves that often wilted in the afternoon sun after an ancient sporting victory!⁶ Paul puts it this way in 1 Cor. 9:25,



Athletes exercise self-control in all things and they do it to receive a perishable prize! But we Christians do so for an **imperishable one.**

² Historians tell us Jews becoming Christians were often cut off from family, means of income or home, and ostracised by their own. Romans viewed Christians as a troublesome sect of Judaism and marginalized them, none-the-less for calling Jesus "Lord" - treason against the emperor. Daily acts of discipleship often offended Jews and Romans alike and brought the risk of abuse, violence, or even death.

³ *makarios*

⁴ Phil. 3:14

⁵ See too Revelation 2:10.

⁶ In contrast to the plant-based victor's crown that wilted in the afternoon sun not long after being received

Our prize is made possible by **the victory Christ won** over sin and death, offering new and eternal life to those who trust in Him. It's a **prize of another order** altogether. The "reward" for staying true to following Jesus promises a **lasting peace, wholeness, and new life** in the presence of God.

REFLECT

Let's pause and **reflect**. Not all Christians face **direct persecution** for following Jesus today.⁷ Does the teaching of James 1:12-18 relate to us too? It does, in the sense that the choice to follow the way of Jesus often brings with it personal **sacrifice** – loving and **servicing others** ahead of ourselves, doing **justice**, extending **forgiveness** and mercy. This can be **costly**. To **stay the course** and follow Jesus' way, we ourselves must know the value of the goal of our discipleship. **Corporate worship**, praising God in the company of believers, is one encouraging way to keep the extraordinary incentive of the "reward" God has in hand for those who complete the journey of faith. Let's keep our **eyes on the prize**.

2. Welcome the encouragement and guidance of your coach (13-18)

The second key strategy James reveals, like those an elite athlete might employ, is to **welcome the encouragement and guidance of our "coach"**.



When Nicola McDermott was starting out, her coach said to her, "give me ten years and I'll get you jumping 2 metres." Nicola recently said, "it took me 15 years!" It **must have been tempting** along that 15 year journey toward her goal to fall away. Imagine how often she might have been distracted and tempted to **behave just like her peers**: to **eat** whatever she likes, to **exercise** only when she wanted to, and to **party** often. She must have developed, with the help of her coach, a very **different mindset and discipline**. Under pressure, humans often divert their eyes from their goal toward things that look "good" to the eye; that might provide instant comfort and pleasure. Elite athletes must re-define what "**good things**" look like for their journey. So too for Christian disciples, according to James.

In verses 13-18 James wants Christians to **change their mind** about **what is "good" for the journey of discipleship**. The Bible teaches us how to think

⁷ For many in other places around the world, staying true to Jesus is much tougher today.

aright to be able to stay steadfast in following Jesus when the going gets tough.

James shows how **desires of the heart** can tempt Christians to **fall away from God**. He teaches us **how to think** with a **right perspective**. He writes in verses 13-18:

¹³ No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; ¹⁵ then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. ¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved. ¹⁷ Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Comfort and **security** must have been tempting alternatives for suffering Christians in James' time. Some Christians wanted to **abandon** God. Others **blamed God** for their tough circumstances. But James coached them (and us) **to think differently** to others:

- i. Firstly, he says, in vs.13 **don't blame God** for your hardships. We know God can't be blamed for tempting us to fail. In God there is no hint of evil. As 1 John 1:5 puts it, "God is light, and in God there is **no darkness at all**."⁸ James returns to this theological assertion in vs. 17 (see below).
- ii. Secondly, James says in vs. 14-15, **desires** from within our hearts, not God, are the **source of temptations**. These can lead us to stray from God's righteous ways when we are facing hardship. James points out the spiritual process that takes place. In the middle ages, the Venerable Bede said there are there are three stages of temptation: 1. Suggestion, 2. Experiment, 3. Consent. The English Monk believed that it's when we reach consent that we may willingly be leaving the path God would want us to take. James wants his readers to learn to discipline their minds to trust God and to **heavily scrutinize** the yearnings of the heart for

⁸ 1 Jn 1:5

comfort, security and self-gratification. These often claim mastery over our minds when facing hardship.

- iii. Thirdly, James urges a change of mind about **where “good” things come from** in life. The old saying, “the grass is greener on the other side” reminds how our eyes are drawn towards what appear to be “greener pastures”. In verses 16-18 James says, “Do not be deceived... Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights⁹, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.¹⁰” In vs. 18 James says we already have great evidence that God is the giver of what is “good” for us: the gift of **regeneration**, of new life, promised through Jesus’ death for sin, and received by faith along with the gift of the Holy Spirit.¹¹ Don’t be deceived, thinking the good life is “over there”. Jesus’ said the truly “happy” are those who stay the course with God, even amidst trials.¹² We must discipline our minds about “**good**” really looks like the journey of discipleship. Truly “good” things for life come from God. James calls us not to consent to the common temptations to look elsewhere. James contrasts **desires that “give birth”** to sin in verse 14 (which leads to a kind of spiritual “death”), to what God has already **given birth to** in us through the Holy Spirit in vs. 18 (which leads to eternal life). He writes: “[God]... **gave us birth** by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.”

⁹ God’s essence and personality are equated with all that is “light.” Darkness often symbolically refers to evil, sin, and corruption (e.g., John 1:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:4). Therefore, light represents goodness, honesty, purity, wisdom, glory, and love—everything that God is. 1 Timothy 6:16 also says that God “dwells in unapproachable light.” Revelation 22:5 promises that those who dwell with the Lord forever will not need other sources of light, because God Himself will be our light. The term Father of lights could also contain a reference to the great lights of the heavens, such as the sun, moon, and stars.

¹⁰ The hymn Great is Thy Faithfulness, sings “there is no shadow of turning with thee”, referring to celestial bodies that have a dark side – not so with God!

¹¹ E.g. Titus 3:4-7

¹² As was explained in the previous sermon, trials themselves are not regarded as “good” in and of themselves by James (or by God). Instead, James taught, they prompt joy in us when we know that opportunity arises to become more mature with the help of God amidst trials (see James 1:2-3). We should not seek trials, and should not reject a path out of hardship if God provides it. I’m acutely aware in our pastoral setting today, that many Christian women facing the trials of domestic family violence may worry that escaping their situation may be discouraged by these verses – this is by no means true. James did not require people to remain in hardship, those he wrote to often simply had no means to escape. The Gospel is liberating, and freeing the “captives” is an essential of its impact. The Church should work to relieve the hardship of all people, including our brothers and sisters under trial everywhere.

REFLECT

Let's pause and reflect once more. I wonder if James would agree that the **Holy Spirit** could be viewed as our **(eternal) life coach**. Under pressure, we may be tempted to think the **"good life"** is to be found somewhere other than God, in the shinier, tastier, more comfortable options our eyes are attracted to. But the "Word of Life", through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, can **encourage** us, **discipline** our minds, and **guide us** through the way of sacrifice that comes with following Christ.

For the journey of following Jesus, especially in tough times, we must learn to love to study the Scriptures, to love to ponder God's goodness to us, and to seek to listen to the Holy Spirit's guidance as we step into the future.

Let's keep our eyes on the prize, and



Let's **welcome** the encouragement and guidance of your **"coach"**.



Nicola McDermott has an impressive tattoo on her arm that **inspired her** towards her high jump goal. It reads: **"fearless hearts are birthed in perfect love"**. It's a paraphrase of 1 John 4:18 in the Bible.

The reference to **love** reminded me of the fundamental difference between the athlete's journey and the journey of the ordinary follower of Jesus. In the athletics world, only a handful might receive the "prize". But, according to James 1:12 God gives the "crown of life" ... "to those who **love the Lord.**"

Our prize has **already be won for us**, by the victory¹³ of Christ upon the cross to defeat sin and bring new life to all. Our **perseverance** as followers of Jesus is of **no particular merit**. Instead, it makes perfect sense that we cannot expect to be there in the end to receive the fulness of that "prize" unless we endure and get over the line (or over the bar). The quality of our "performance" on the journey may vary greatly one to another, but **all** who endure will be co-victors!

The Apostle Paul testified this way, saying:

¹⁰ I want to know Christ¹⁰ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal;¹² **but I press on** to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own... ¹⁴ I press on

¹³ 1 Cor. 5:57

toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly¹⁵ call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind... let us hold fast to what we have attained. (Philippians 3:10-15)

Keep your **eyes on the** eternal prize, discipline your mind about what is truly “good” for your life and where those “good” things come from, and **welcome** the encouragement and guidance of our life-**coach** on the journey – the Holy Spirit of God. Amen.