



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

October 9, 2016 - James 1:9-11

Two Kinds of Trouble, One Hope—Real Faith for Real People Series

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Before we dive into this text I want to tell you why I think this passage matters to me, and why I think it might matter to you. This passage gives us a case study of two different kinds of trouble and how to face those difficulties. The Book of James is really a series of case studies for people who are either trying to figure out how to follow Jesus or people who are weighing whether there's anything reliable about the Christian faith. Does Christianity work in real lives in the real world? The Book of James is focused on examples of what it looks like when people seek to live out what they believe about Jesus Christ.

What James talks about in the opening section of his letter is how to handle the trials, disappointments, and difficulties that are inevitable in our lives and to handle those challenges with wisdom, which is what Pastor Dan talked about last Sunday. In the text we will focus on today, James talks about two kinds of trouble.

One kind of trouble is super-obvious to most of us. The first kind of trouble he mentions is what most of his original readers were facing. The second kind of trouble is not usually seen by most people especially here in the United States and in other wealthy nations as a potential problem, but James says that it really is. In fact, I think from James' perspective the second kind of trouble can actually be more dangerous than the first.

Let's talk a little bit about the man who wrote the words we're reading today. It may be a little crude, but I do

love what Tim Keller says about the author of this book. James is a guy who grew up sharing a bathroom with Jesus. The author of the book we're studying was the little brother of Jesus. Yes, Mary and Joseph had other kids after Jesus was born. One of them was named James. And what makes it so amazing that James would say what he says about his older brother in verse 1, is the fact that he grew up with Jesus.

If you have siblings like I do, let's think about that for a second. It is certainly possible to respect and even idolize our siblings, but how difficult would it be for you to come to the conclusion one day that one of your siblings was the Lord of the Universe?!

If you have a super controlling brother or sister, it might not be that difficult to imagine how they might rule the universe. But think about it for a second. Jesus and James played together; they probably slept in the same room. They did chores together. So how is it that James introduces himself at the beginning of his letter by simply saying, *"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion. Greetings!"*

How do you grow up sharing a bathroom with someone and one day come to the conclusion that your sibling is not only your brother, but is your Lord and you are His servant? We know from the gospel writers that James and his other siblings didn't always believe these things about Jesus.

In fact, they once thought Jesus was nuts. So, what happened that radically changed his understanding of his brother?

His understanding of who his brother is and what He is capable of doing, changed so dramatically that he is able to tell other people in this letter that when all hell breaks loose in your life...you can count on Jesus to be there for you. The little brother of Jesus grows up to become one of the four main leaders of the early church. Along with John, Peter and Paul, Jesus' little brother becomes the leader of the church his brother started in Jerusalem.

So, that transformation, I think, gives what we're reading some credibility. So, let's do a quick review of what he's said so far before we look at the two kinds of trouble we can face and the one hope we can have in the midst of it all.

First, trials and trouble are inevitable. All of us are going to go through difficult times.

James 1: 2-4 says, *"2 Dear brothers and sisters, WHEN troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; 4 and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing."*

Pastor Dan walked us through this point a couple of weeks ago.

Don't let anyone tell you that your life will be free of difficulty if you follow Jesus Christ. If you ever hear a pastor say anything like that, run immediately out the backdoor of the church or switch the channel on the TV. James doesn't say, "IF you face troubles." He says, "WHEN troubles of any kind come your way." Difficulties are going to come.

The primary proof of this statement is the life of Jesus. Jesus suffered. If He suffered, how can we expect to have a life free of difficulty? Jesus suffered not that we might not suffer, but that in our suffering we might become more like Him.

Mark Labberton, the current president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California and the former senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, the church I served in California, tells an amazing story about a woman from that church. Her name was Doris Kraft. I knew Doris. She was a wonderful servant of Jesus. When Mark tells her story in his book, *"The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor"*, he begins by sharing the apology Doris made for not showing up to a meeting at the church. Doris called Mark to apologize for not delivering the muffins she'd promised to bring to the meeting. She wasn't able to come to the meeting because she'd been kidnapped! Mark then tells what happened to Doris on her way to the church.

As soon as Mark got the message he drove immediately to Doris' apartment. Doris was one of the most elegant women I had ever met and she was in her eighties the day she was carjacked by a man suffering from drug addiction. Mark writes, "I made my way straight from church to her tidy apartment. Shaken but steady, Doris greeted me at the door. Every protective pastoral corpuscle was firing in me as I leaped at the chance to surround Doris with love and support in the midst of this trauma. But that day, as other times too, Doris proved to be my pastor more than I could be hers."

Listen to a little bit of how Doris explained to Mark what happened to her. "After he took off in the car, the first thing I did, of course, was to ask him his name," I suppose that's a good rule of thumb. When you're kidnapped, ask your kidnapper his name. "He said it was Jesse," she went on. "So I said, 'Jesse, what are you doing?' "'I'm kidnapping you so we can go to your ATM and get money out of your account,' Jesse told me. "So I said, 'Jesse, why are you doing this?' "He told me it was because he needed the money for drugs. He was addicted and needed a hit. So I just said, 'Well, Jesse, it's a terrible thing to be a drug addict. You really shouldn't be a drug addict. It's not the way you should be living your life.'"

As they went from one ATM to another, Doris said she explained to Jesse that he really needed help, that this drug problem was much bigger than he was. He needed help from God, who really loved and understood him. Doris told Jesse he also needed an effective drug rehab program. Jesse replied he had tried that, but Doris suggested he needed a better program than the one he described to her. Then Doris said, "Jesse, God wants to help you." By the time they got the third ATM Jesse was no longer able to get money out of the machine because the daily withdrawal limit had been reached. So he pulled the car over and got ready to abandon Doris even though he had hit her in the head when he seized control of her car.

But Doris was not done. Listen to Doris, "Jesse, I am going to pray that you get caught for this, because it's wrong and you shouldn't get away with doing this to people. I'm also going to pray that you will be caught so I cannot only testify you did it, but so I can plead with the judge to get you into a really good drug rehab program. You need to get caught, so you can be stopped and helped. You need God to give you the strength to get off drugs and have a better life. "

Mark jokes, "I'm sure I would have said something just like this to a kidnapper."

Jesse was going to just leave Doris in her car and take off. But Doris was so battered and stiff that she couldn't get out of the passenger's side of the car. So Jesse said he would come around and help her. He came to the passenger's side of the car, opened the door, helped her out, held her arm and walked her to the driver's side of the car. Once she was in the car he put the seatbelt across her, leaned in and kissed her on the cheek.

Now listen to what happened next. How do you explain this response of Doris Kraft? How do you explain any of her responses to Jesse? She tells Mark, "So that's what happened," Doris said. Pastoral adrenaline still rushing, I leaned toward her and with all the empathy I could exude, I said, "I am so sorry this horrible thing happened, Doris." "It's true, it is horrible," Doris agreed.

But then, without much of a pause, she added, "But the really horrible thing is Jesse's addiction to drugs." "But it's awful that you should get attacked and kidnapped like this," I responded. "Well, yes, but really, why not me?" asked Doris. "This sort of thing happens every day to thousands of people. There's no particular reason this shouldn't happen to me." When Doris finally said, "Let's pray for my getting over this, but also for Jesse," Mark then writes, "I was thinking that I was also in need of prayer as I tried to absorb this conversation."

How is it possible that Doris was even thinking about what might be best for Jesse? She didn't disregard her own needs and yet she was concerned for more than her own concerns. How does one become a person like that? Everything in Doris, every fiber of her being believed her God was God for Jesse, too. The same love God extended to her was also for him.

¹ Labberton Mark (2010-10-18). *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor: Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Jesus* (Kindle Locations 93-101). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

God's heart seeks the welfare of His enemies, so hers did too.

About 15 years ago people were talking about W.W.J.D.—What Would Jesus Do? Mark joked that after this conversation with Doris he thought about W.W.D.D.—What Would Doris Do?

How do I become a person who finds God in the midst of the most difficult, even frightening moments? How can I not only be concerned for my own needs but for the predicaments others find themselves in?

So James starts his letter by reminding us first, that trials and trouble are inevitable. All of us are going to go through difficult times. Jesus suffered not that we might not suffer but that in our suffering we might become more like Jesus. Doris learned to be like Jesus through a long life of ups and downs, disappointments and joys. And when this terrible thing happened to her, her response was that she was not surprised. She didn't have the expectation that her life would be free of pain and difficulty. She knew she could trust her God no matter what. I want to be more like Doris.

Second, one of the purposes of suffering is to make us wise. Trials and troubles can bring wisdom if trials and troubles lead us to cry out to God for His help and wisdom. Trials and troubles reveal the truth about our vulnerabilities and our need for Someone outside ourselves to help us. That's some of the wisdom that Doris had discovered.

So here comes James' first case study. There are two kinds of trouble but both have one hope. Here's the first one. James writes in chapter 1 verse 9, *"Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up."*

The first kind of trouble James talks about is the trouble people find themselves in when they are living in material poverty. My bet is that most of the people who first read this letter found themselves in that situation.

They were followers of Jesus but because of the persecution of the church, they had been run out of town and were probably living as refugees in communities far from their homes.

I've been to internally displaced persons' camps in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where children and mothers and some men were living after their villages were burned to the ground. Many of the women I met had been sexually assaulted. I remember the day my team and I drove to one of these IDP camps.

As soon as we got out of our van we were surrounded by hundreds of children. I remember talking with one 10 or 11 year old boy who spoke a little English. He was an intelligent kid, who still had light in his eyes. He was filthy dirty, his clothes needed to be cleaned and he was in danger of losing his handsome smile because he obviously had not brushed his teeth in a very long time. Here were people who knew what it meant to be lowly.

The kind of person James is talking about is probably one who is living in poverty, but maybe he's talking to some of us. We may not be people who are living in the kind of grinding depravation I've seen around the world but what he has to say is relevant to the person who's career has collapsed, who has lost their way professionally, or has never had the opportunity to thrive. James says that there is reason for this person to rejoice in this humble place. The advantage that a person in this lowly position has is the possibility of hitching their hopes to the One who will not disappoint but will always satisfy.

So James encourages them to boast about their lowly position because it is in that place of need that people often look to Jesus for their identity, their security, their hope. That is what I have seen in the lives of countless people I've met around the world who are facing even the most extreme adversity.

That's the first kind of trouble we can find ourselves in. But, here's an even more surprising statement James makes about trouble. James also talks about the person who is wealthy and when he does, he says something that is absolutely unexpected. What James is saying is something we generally don't have on our personal radar. James is saying that one of life's greatest troubles is prosperity. The thing that can put us in the greatest peril sometimes, the condition that can actually threaten our well-being the most is our wealth.

Listen to what James says, *"9 Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, 10 and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. 11 For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away."*

It's really quite surprising. James mentions two kinds of troubles. The first is poverty, adversity, difficulty, depravation and the second, and maybe greater kind of trouble, is to have no troubles. He seems to be saying that one of the greatest spiritual trials we can go through, one of the greatest dangers to our spiritual health is to have no difficulties. The greatest spiritual danger is to have no danger in your life.

James says, *"Let the believer who is rich boast in being brought low because like the flowering grass, he will pass away."* Here's what's so dangerous about prosperity. The more prosperous we become, the more we set our hearts on things that are going to fade away and ultimately disappoint us. The more prosperous we become, the more we can tend to put our hopes in things that don't provide ultimate satisfaction.

I don't think many of us have this on our personal radar. I don't think we believe that being wealthy can be dangerous.

But James says that our wealth can be one of our greatest dangers because it first makes us believe that we can take care of ourselves. Our wealth gives us options, good options. Don't get me wrong, I'd rather be well off than poor. I'd rather have healthcare than have no access to medical care. I would rather have a roof over my head and an air conditioner I can blast during the hot and humid months of summer. I'd rather have the choice between Safeway, Foodland and even Whole Foods than wondering tonight where my next meal was coming from.

But the trouble with wealth is that I can build my life on these good things and fail to build my life of the One who is really my only, final, trustworthy hope. I can live like I don't need Jesus because I have access to all the things I think I need to live my life.

James is writing to two Christians, one who is poor and one who is rich. He encourages both of them to look to Christ and find their identity in Him. To the one who is poor, to the one who is tempted to feel like their life really doesn't matter. To the ones who feel powerless in a world that can judge people's worth and value based on how much money they have or how much status they have, James tell them to lift their eyes and see that they are actually exalted in Jesus to the highest heights. They belong to Christ.

James believes that wealth could be one of life's greatest dangers if we put our ultimate hope in our wealth and the power it gives us. If we seek our ultimate sense of value from our achievements and accomplishments, as great as they might be, we're in big trouble. So, he encourages those who are wealthy to boast in their humble status as those who belong to Jesus. That is a status that is never going to fade away. That is an identity that is secure.

Trials and troubles are inevitable and I think sometimes there is a hidden gift in our difficulties. Troubles reveal

the things in our lives that are in the process of fading away. And, strange as it may seem, that realization is what can make troubles and difficulties a gift.

Trouble encourages us to transfer our hopes and longings from those things that will pass away, from those things that will never provide ultimate satisfaction, and place them in the One who never passes away and will never disappoint us.

I've got one last little reading from Mark Labberton's book, *"The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor"*. Mark writes, "It wasn't a great surprise that within a couple of months, Doris was at the police station identifying Jesse. Soon after that, she sat in the witness box at the courthouse: "Yes, hello, Jesse, remember me? Doris? I said I was going to pray for this moment and I told you why. Here we are! Yes, Judge, Jesse was the one, and yes, he did do all those things. And, another thing, Judge, Jesse really needs a good drug rehab program so he can get his life back. I know he's guilty. But he also really needs help, please, Judge."

"Doris loved her enemy. She loved her enemy without hesitancy, and she did so in ways that reflect the purpose of her life and the reality of the world she lives in. She did not choose to claim or shrink into victimhood, though she had been violated. She was courageous and honest. She was not in denial. She was willing and able to step toward her enemy with truth and justice, to seek what was best for his welfare without disregarding her own. Everything in Doris believed her God was God for Jesse too. The same love God extended to her was also for him. God's heart seeks the welfare of his enemies, so hers did too."

I want to grow up to be more like Doris Kraft. She had learned to trust Jesus like that because day after day she sought to put the full weight of her life down on Jesus. She learned

that through the difficulties she experienced and because she looked to God in the middle of the troubles of her life, Doris discovered, just as Jesus' little brother did, that Jesus can be trusted.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com

² Labberton Mark (2010-10-18). *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor: Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Jesus* (Kindle Locations 93-101). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.