

Loyalty in all circumstances
James 1:1-4, Phil 1:3-6

Brothers and sisters, are you a loyal person? And if so, what or who are you loyal to?

Do you have a favorite team you will always support no matter how poorly they are doing? A favorite car brand that you will always buy? Or a favorite singer who you love even when they've become ubiquitously overplayed? It doesn't matter you'll always be a Swiftly!

Or maybe you're the kind of person who always has their friend's back. If someone has a problem with your friend they have a problem with you as well. You are there for the people you love through thick and thin. Your friend could call you up in the middle of the night for a favor and you'd do it – no questions asked.

Why? Because they are your friends, your fam, your bros, and it's all about your relationship and connection that you share with them. It's all about loyalty.

So, are you that kind of person? Do you have someone who is that kind of person for you? Or maybe you have a dog?

One of the reasons we love our dogs is that they can be incredibly loyal to us. You are their world and they are always there ready to give you their affection and love and show you how happy there are to see you when you get home.

You've heard me say this before – but indulge me again – that the difference between cats and dogs is that a dog says *“you feed me, you walk me, you play with me, you take care of me... you must be god!”* whereas a cat says *“you feed me, you walk me, you play with me, you take care of me... I must be god!”*

And so, as we consider if we are loyal people this morning it's interesting to note that it's easy to think about examples of loyalty to sports teams, bands and singers, even our friends and our pets but we typically don't think about examples of loyalty that have to do with our relationship to God, to Jesus Christ, to the Holy Spirit.

In that respect, we are more like cats brothers and sisters, and even for those who consider themselves to be God's dogs, we must admit its rather easy to be loyal to the one who blesses us and gives us all that we need – isn't it?!

So, what this means for loyalty brothers and sisters – our loyalty to Jesus Christ – is that whatever we might profess about it, it needs to be proven in the daily reality of our lives. We need to walk the talk and prove... that we are truly loyal.

But how do we go about that and what does it look like?

Well brothers and sisters, the Lord is good – Jesus has given us a book of the bible, written by his own brother James, to show us how our loyalty can be proved and help loyalty become the defining characteristic of our relationship with Him.

As I said we typically don't frame our relationship with Jesus as being about loyalty, do we... Instead, we think about our relationship with Christ as savior, as one who encourages and affirms us, we think of him as a friend, a brother.

Or we might frame it through correct teaching about Jesus. He was fully God and fully man, born of the virgin Mary, the Word made flesh, the Messiah who fulfills all the O.T promises and prophecies, and the Lamb of God who died for our sin.

And so, our relationship to Christ is typically framed in terms of knowing who He is, and in terms of believing in Him and trusting in Him and having faith in Him – all good and true and biblically correct aspects of how we relate to Jesus.

But framing our relationship with Christ in terms of loyalty, that combines all the knowledge, belief, trust and faith and confronts us in all circumstances of our daily lives with the question – *“so what difference does this make here?”*

If you view your relationship to Christ as a matter of loyalty, its impossible to be a Sunday-only Christian, a Christmas and Easter Christian, a “Yeah... I said the sinner's prayer at camp when I was 10” kind of Christian.

So be prepared brothers and sisters, as we look at loyalty in the book of James over the next couple of months, the Holy Spirit will use loyalty to increase our faithfulness, allegiance, and steadfastness to Jesus in everyday life. Amen?

So, loyalty – how do we know the book of James is all about loyalty? What clues us into this?

Well, the first clue comes as James starts his introduction saying *“James a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”* but James was an excellent writer of Greek and the Greek grammar here also says *“Jame a servant of Jesus Christ, God and Lord!”* So James introduces loyalty as He confesses Jesus as God and Lord, and identifies himself as a servant.

The next clue is in the recipients of the letter, the *“twelve tribes scattered among the nations.”* It is very significant that James addresses the church as the twelve tribes, but the loyalty emphasis comes through in the fact that the defining trait of the twelve tribes as the nation of Isreal was their covenant relationship with God and its required **loyalty**.

Conversely, it was their lack of covenant loyalty and faithfulness which eventually reduced them from a nation to twelve tribes in exile, scattered among other nations.

But the big giveaway is in vs. 2 where James opens with this statement *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.”* There’s no way James can state this as truth in good conscience, unless the underlying reason relates to... proving one’s loyalty.

How else is it a joy to face trials, unless through those trials you prove you are loyal, and loyalty is the most important and defining factor in your life!?

So, James is all about loyalty. We can see that right from the start and it will continue to become more and more obvious as we work our way through his letter.

But why is loyalty so important? Why make this the focal point for a letter to the early church? Why does James consider loyalty to be the important factor to focus on?

Because James knows the history of the God's people in the Old Testament, the twelve tribes, and James knows the path his brother Jesus walked with them during his earthly ministry.

James has seen the propensity of our fickle human hearts to give way in the face of challenges, trials, persecution... and prosperity, and he knows it will be no different for the Church.

You see brothers and sisters, when God does an amazing work – like delivering you from slavery in Egypt, giving you His laws, bringing you through the desert into the promised land, defeating your enemies and blessing you, calling you His chosen people! It's easy to expect being God's people means a victorious life, a golden ticket to an easy ride.

So when God sent Jesus as the Messiah, James had seen God's people struggle with this, and likely struggled himself as well.

First, the Jews had expected the Messiah would defeat the Romans, deliver them and restore the Kingdom of Israel – but... as you know, that didn't happen. Jesus didn't do that.

Secondly, even after Jesus' resurrection this was still the expectation. Instead... as you know, Jesus commanded them to bring God's Kingdom to other nations – and make disciples.

And thirdly, as they pursued this mission, they experienced difficulty and persecution along with their success. So the question would be asked "If Jesus is God and Lord why are we, his loyal obedient followers, being persecuted!?"

These three trials would present a serious challenge to the professed loyalty of God's people in the early church and many believers would find themselves wondering and questioning their loyalty to Jesus Christ as God and Lord.

So, as James starts his letter, he wants to inform them that these trials are not indicators that they've made a foolish mistake in following Jesus, but in fact are the means by which their profession of loyalty to Jesus is tested, and can proven to be genuine. And what a joy it is to know that truly you have genuine loyalty, that you are not a fair-weather follower.

And its the same for us brothers and sisters. We must go through testing as well and we need to hear James say to us *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.”*

I think this is a kinder way of expressing the truth and wisdom in one of the great lines from the Princess Bride where the man in black says to Princess Buttercup *“Life is pain Princess, anyone who says otherwise is selling something!”*

So, in a kinder, gentler and pastoral way James says to us *“What is our life if not a tale of facing various trials and challenges?”* or as his brother Jesus had once said to the disciples *“in this world you will have trouble...” (John 16:33)* So, what is the tale of your life brothers and sisters, what are the many kinds of trials that you have faced, what trouble have you had?

Now the Greek word for *many kinds* or *various*, “*poikilos*” also means diversified, complex, intricate. It is also used in the gospels, like Matt 4:24 to reference the variety of illness and

sickness that Jesus healed, and in 2 Tim 3:5 and Titus 3:3 where the variety of sinful human desires are referenced. So, James uses it to reflect a wide scope of trials which we’ll face.

And the Greek word for faced, “*peripipto*” also “*meeting, encountering, to run up against something.*” The Good Samaritan “*encounters*” robbers on the way to Jericho. Paul’s ship “*runs up against*” the reef and sinks. Its also related to the Greek verb “*peripateo*” – which means to walk about.

So, what are the various trials we will face? ALL the different kinds of sickness, illness, diseases, bodily infirmities which can occur. They may be various unmet desires in our hearts, the struggles we experience to meet them, the consequences that come due to their sinfulness, and all the various kinds of circumstances we may encounter and run up against as we go about our daily walk of life.

So, these trials are everything from feeling run down with a cold to get diagnosed with cancer, from twisting our ankle to developing chronic back pain. They include the drive-thru

getting your order wrong all the way having your debit card hacked to getting hit with an unexpected tax bill. They are the consequences of being lashing out in anger, being proud, lustful or lazy. They are the car breaking down, the furnace quitting, your basement flooding, your toilet clogging, or dropping your phone in the toilet while trying to unclog it.

So brothers and sisters, the point is that we are to be loyal in ALL circumstances. So how do we do that? Well let me first say that its these various kinds of trials that we need to watch out for as they are more important than religious trials.

For example when we experience a religious trial, like Parks Canada cancelling concert permits because it's a Christian concert - it's easy to stand up and be counted as loyal to Jesus.

But when there seems to be nothing about Jesus or our faith in the trial we don't even really think about how this is testing our loyalty and so we miss it. This is why James instructs us to "consider it!" and this Greek word "*hegeomai*" also means to count something, to think, to rule over, or to be governor.

So, the first step in staying loyal to Jesus in these various trials is to govern our reactions, to rule over our emotions, and then when time permits later on – take time to think about what has happened in order that we may figure out how we can account for this being a test of our faith.

It's not natural for us to do this when we drop our phone into the toilet while we are trying to unclog it – but it is possible for us to do this as baptised believers because as 2 Tim 1:7 reminds us, we have been given the Holy Spirit, a Spirit of self-discipline, of self-control, of power.

So when our phone is at the bottom of that nasty toilet, we control the urge to let loose with a string of curse words, to chew out the one who is responsible for clogging up the toilet, we exercise self-control.

And this isn't behaviorism brothers and sisters, its being loyal to Jesus because He gave us His Holy Spirit of self-control, we are using His Spirit's resources in the trial, not our own – that's loyalty to Him.

Then, once we've retrieved the phone and unclogged the toilet and cleaned and sanitized everything – we have a moment to think about what happened and consider it and determine how we are going to account this. Now don't think I'm being silly here – because this happens whether we are intentional about it or not.

You are going to go through the rest of your day with this incident playing around in your mind, you're probably going to tell someone about it – or more likely complain or vent to someone about it, and its going to be filed in your memory as another example of... why you are so unlucky, or why you can't catch a break, or how you have to deal with everyone else's crap and how it costs you...

So, be intentional about how the Holy Spirit wants you to understand what you just went through or your sinful nature will do it for you and not in a good way.

In this case thinking and reflecting on the situation may have the Holy Spirit help you realize that you are often careless, you

need to work on that. You might be convicted about all the curse words that wanted to come off your tongue. You may realize that your carelessness was caused because you were distracted by the frustration and indignation of having to do something that you considered to be beneath you...

So then, you account this episode, this trial, as something the Holy Spirit used to work towards your sanctification, something where you were made aware of sin – and were able to confess it to Jesus, and ask Jesus' forgiveness for it, instead of justifying it because of your circumstances. And then, you can pray that Jesus will provide you with another phone – because you believe all blessings come from Him, that's all loyalty to Jesus you see.

And then when you inevitably talk about this later on – while you may convey your dismay at the inglorious demise of your phone, your recounting of this trial shows that you truly believe the truth of Jesus' apostle Paul in Rom 8:28 saying "*in all things God works for the good of those who love him...*" This is loyalty to Jesus.

So, consider it ALL joy my brothers and sisters... when you encounter and run up against various trials!

Make a conscious, intentional decision to account these trials as a joy. It's not that you're happy you have to replace a phone that you don't have money for, and you're not trying to find a the silver lining either, as in *"oh well... you were only three months away from an upgrade anyways..."*

Rather it is "a joy," you consider it as something that brings you good. You are able to describe this specific good, and articulate how it was brought about by the Holy Spirit of Jesus, contributes to your sanctification, and most importantly to you – it was the opportunity to show your loyalty to Jesus.

Encountering trials of various kinds... this is our life brothers and sisters, and because it is life, it happens repeatedly.

So, what James says is true – that trials test your faith and the testing of your faith - not only proves your loyalty but...

because it happens repeatedly over time it produces perseverance, or steadfastness.

Then James says something very important *"Let perseverance, or steadfastness, finish its work!"* Because you know what derails this whole project? Missing the focus on loyalty in these trials and thinking it's just about learning a lesson. Then thinking that if we can just quickly learn that lesson, life go back to be smooth again. But God is not teaching you a lesson!

Thinking that way tempts you to think of trials as punishments – instead Jesus is refining your loyalty. He is making sure that you have lasting loyalty, that continues throughout your life, that holds up as the trials intensify and the cost of being loyal to Jesus increases. Do you know what you call that kind of loyalty? Steadfastness!

James says steadfastness needs to finish its work – so don't interrupt it and derail it by thinking this is all about learning lessons and then you will get back to an easy life.

And that in itself is a trial for us because we are accustomed to living in a consumer society that caters to making our life easier, more convenient and comfortable, solving problems and challenges and minimizing any pain and suffering.

But loyalty to Jesus means that our top priority is not the pursuit of happiness – but the pursuit of holiness. And that's just my way of summarizing what James describes as the end goal of perseverance finishing its work, we become mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Now we know how to let the pursuit of happiness finish its work so that we do not lack anything don't we? We raise our kids to go to get good grades, to go to good schools, so they can get good jobs, and they can then buy a good house, get a good car, have vacations, and not be lacking for anything. We don't raise our kids or plan our lives so that we can be lacking for housing, or lacking for clothes or food and so on.

But the purpose of life is not happiness its holiness, so we should ask ourselves *"have I been so focused on making sure*

I'm not lacking anything for happiness that I've completely missed out on making sure I'm not lacking in anything for the day of holiness?"

That's why we also read Phil 1:6 this morning brothers and sisters. *"being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."* Paul reminds us that we are being prepared for the day of Christ Jesus. Do we give much thought about what it would be like to face that day lacking something?

We certainly make sure our kids don't go back for the first day of school lacking something!

But do we realize that on this side of our own passing into eternity we are far too consumed with a life of happiness that we are with holiness? So we are lacking... Are we aware that we are not very eager for is coming next... our resurrection bodies, a new creation, seeing the Lord face to face? So we lack a desire for the Lord to return and the Kingdom to come...

Well, we don't actually have to worry about it – thank goodness! Because as Paul reminds us as God has begun this good work in us, HE is going to carry it on to completion to ensure we are ready for the day of Christ.

However – if we don't realize this is what Jesus, as Lord and God, is doing over the course of our lives, if we don't understand that we are currently not yet ready for the day of Christ, because of what we lack...

If we don't know that all the trials in our lives produce perseverance and perseverance needs to finish its work so that we become mature and complete... and we are eagerly awaiting the return of Christ and the happiness of this world has finally lost its lustre... so we are finally mature.

Then we are going to be fighting the work of the Holy Spirit all the way along. We'll make the whole sanctification process much more difficult on ourselves than it needs to be. The Christian life will be a terrible struggle and a constant wrestling match of trying to understand and make sense of

why God allows all these trials into your life, and you will always be struggling with your loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Don't let it be like that for you brothers and sisters.

Jesus is Lord and God – He is going to do what He is going to do, so... make a decision today that you are going to be loyal to Him.

Determine that with the help of His Holy Spirit, you are going to consider how the various trials you run up against in this life, can be accounted as a joy to you, so that you become mature and complete!

And when the Lord calls you into the next life, and you can hear Him say *"Well done good and loyal servant. You were faithful with little; I will entrust you with much – enter into your Master's happiness!"*

Receive this as the Lord's truth for you this morning brothers and sisters - Amen.