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God's Upside Down Economy
James 1:9-18
October 4th, 2015, Jeff Germo

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In the year 2000 there were 50 new books written on happiness. In 2008 there were 4000 total books on happiness. In 2013 there were, according to my amazon.com search just over 31,000 books on happiness. I did a search on Amazon.com last week and found that there are now over 89,000 books on the topic of happiness. I don't know how many of those were newly written in the last year, but it just goes to show that, generally speaking, people are dissatisfied with their lives and are wondering how to find happiness. Happiness seems to be the new Holy Grail. It is what everyone is searching for. And for many people it is elusive.

What kinds of things are people generally looking for to make them happy?

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In a poll a few years ago, 18 to 25 year olds were surveyed and 81% answered that the most important goal of their generation was to become wealthy, and 51% said that alongside that was the goal of fame. It's funny that this never seems to change. As a matter of fact, the idea that fame and wealth will somehow bring about unthinkable happiness seems to be increasing. The popularity of all the reality TV shows attests to this.

And yet, study after study shows that it is just not true. There is a series of articles that Vancouver Sun columnist Daphane Bramham wrote a couple years ago about happiness. Here is what she wrote:

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On the micro-level, Brene Brown from the University of Houston has concluded that to be happy, people must embrace their own vulnerability, admit to their weaknesses and mistakes and learn to listen to others.

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Brown describes the happy people she studies as being "wholehearted," which among other things meant they "were willing to let go of who they should be to be who they were."...

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...So what does it take to be happy? Psychologist Ryan Howell from San Francisco State University's personality and well-being lab has come up with a list of five characteristics. Happy people manage their money well; spend money on life experiences rather than things; retain good memories of the past and skip over the bad bits; are empathetic; and live in communities where they feel they belong and are valued.¹

The problem is that even though we know this, generally speaking, we don't live it.

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I may be wrong, but I think most people believe that in order to be happy they need to pursue wealth to a greater or lesser degree. Or, that they can't be happy until they have

¹ (Daphane Bramham, Vancouver Sun, March 23, 2013)

reached a certain goal, or until they've eliminated a certain obstacle in their lives. "I will be happy when this or that obstacle is removed from my life."

Well, we saw last week that we can actually have joy right now, but it is something we need to purposefully grab hold of. Joy will not be found by those who sit around waiting for something to change before they are happy.

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Joy is something that we can all choose to live with right now.

Now, **one of the reasons that some people are unhappy is because they compare themselves to others.**

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They look at what their neighbours have and if they don't measure up to the Jones' next door they feel like they have to make some changes in order to rise to their neighbour's level of achievement. The problem with that, of course, is that it doesn't work. Once the Jones' see that you have risen to their level they move up a notch in order to rise above you again. And then you are back where you started from, feeling miserable because you don't measure up to a standard the world has set for you, or in reality, a standard you set for yourself.

And it's not just money and possessions that trap us this cycle. It's fame or popularity, position or status, beauty or brawn, ability or skill, grades or acumen, or anything else we use to measure ourselves against others so we can somehow lull ourselves into believing that we are equal to or better than someone else. It's a dead end street.

Our value is is not based on what we have or do not have, or what we can or cannot do.

God's economy is different than ours. He does not judge our worth based on any external thing.

Let's take a look at our passage.

[10]

James 1:9–18 (ESV)

⁹ Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

I think we all know, at an intellectual level, at least, that these temporal things do not bring lasting happiness, but do we live like it's true? James says **death is the great equalizer.**

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When we die we are financially equal. We ask the question when someone dies, "How much did he leave behind?" The answer for every person that has ever lived and then died is the same. "All of it." When we die we leave it all behind. We take nothing with us.

All of the things we are tempted to put so much importance on down here, upon death instantly vaporize. **Death is the great equalizer.** And yet we live as though accumulating wealth and all those other things is the most important thing in life. When we do that we are attempting to build a heaven on earth from things that are only going to end up in the landfill.

We need to be clear that the Bible does not teach that being wealthy is wrong. Job was wealthy. Abraham, and all the patriarchs in the Old Testament were wealthy. David, as king, was wealthy. So, money is not the problem. As a matter of fact, the amount of money one has really has very little bearing on whether or not a person is greedy or money hungry. Someone who is very poor can be just as materialistic as a rich person.

Someone who is poor can have their focus so totally on trying to get ahead that they miss God in the process and forget to trust him for their daily bread. And as a result of this they can easily feel like they are worth less than the person of means and become jealous. And likewise the wealthy person can be so focused on accumulating, that their money becomes more important than God or their relationships with people. They could tend to feel superior because of their wealth and financial acumen and look down on the person who struggles financially. The issue is our *attitude* towards money.

The problem starts when we think our money is *our* money. When we believe that money equals power, we do our best to accumulate and hoard and have more than others so we can justify our existence. The truth is that our money is not *our* money. As Christ-followers we don't own anything. God has given us what we have to take care of for him. We are stewards of what God has given us to manage and invest eternally.

What does James say is the key?

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⁹ Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.

Death is the great equalizer. We need to keep our hearts focused on eternity. What do we think is important? Where do we invest our money, time and energy? What is our heart focused on?

Here's what Paul says in Colossians 3.

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Colossians 3:1–6 (ESV)

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

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⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

Notice Paul says when we look at something we don't have, and long for it, we turn it into an idol. We worship the thing instead of God, the creator of the thing.

Both Paul and James say that the key is to live a life with your heart and mind set on eternity. James actually gets specific in verse 12.

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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.

This is an eternal mindset.

Worship songwriter Brian Doerksen's son, Isaiah, suffers from a genetic condition called Fragile X Syndrome, which results in physical, intellectual, emotional, and behavioural limitations. In his book Make Love, Make War, Brian reflects on the day he and his wife first received medical confirmation of Isaiah's condition. In the midst of his heartache, as Brian considered turning away from worship ministry altogether, God taught Brian a lesson that instead carried him further into his ministry:

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[After receiving the test results], I stumbled around our property weeping, confused, heartbroken. At one point I lifted my voice to heaven and handed in my resignation: "God, I am through being a worship leader and songwriter ..."

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When I was able to be quiet enough to hear, I sensed God holding out his hand and inviting me: "Will you trust me?" Will you go even with your broken heart—for who will relate to my people who are heartbroken if not those like you who are acquainted with disappointment?"

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Reflecting further on this word from God, Brian writes:

I used to think people were most blessed by our great victories. But now I know differently: People are just longing to hear [others] speak of how they have walked through the deepest valleys. The world lifts up the victorious and the successful, but God lifts up the brokenhearted.²

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James 1:12 (ESV)

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.

² "The Wounded Warrior" Men of Integrity (entry 3-11-10 from the March/April, 2010 issue); Brian Doerksen Make Love, Make War (David C. Cook, 2009)

Blessed... Happy. Joyful is the one who keeps her eyes on the things that are really important in life, in the middle of the storms, instead of on the fleeting, temporal things that entice us down here. Joy comes to the one who perseveres when tested.

Sometimes we need to wait for what seems like an inordinate length of time in the middle of the trial before we see God's hand of deliverance. But, what we don't see is what God is doing in the background. He is working. We may not see it, but he is working behind the scenes. And if we hang on through the storm joy will be ours.

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¹³ 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.

There is a difference between tempting and testing. Satan, the enemy of our souls, is the tempter. His goal is to cause us to sin. He will try to use both our weaknesses and our strengths to entice us to assess our worth based on what we can or can't do, or what we have or do not have.

God, on the other hand will never tempt us. He, because of his perfect nature, cannot tempt us to sin. Satan will try to use the trials we experience to lead us away from God. God uses those same trials to bring us closer, to cause us to trust him more. There is a huge difference between the motive of God and that of Satan. So, the same trial, depending on our response to it, can strengthen our faith, or weaken it.

I've told you the story about how, many years ago, I lost my construction business. We lost everything. Some of it was my fault. Some of it was some bad circumstances. It was an extremely painful time in my life. I was at the bottom. And at the low point in my life I had a choice as to how I was going to respond. I could get hard and bitter and blame God or others. That would have been a choice to listen to Satan. Or, I could respond in humility and ask God what I could learn from it.

I thought I would try something new and choose the way of humility. And the Lord showed me that I had been trying to build my empire, and it was getting in the way of my relationship with him and with others, especially with Ruthie.

Satan tried to use that experience to tempt me to get bitter and angry. God turned it around for good. The test made me stronger. God never tempts us to sin. He tests us to make us stronger.

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¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Who is my worst enemy? We just talked about Satan. He is out to destroy us. He wants to do everything in his power to cause us to fall. He will use discouragement. He'll dangle shiny things in front of us and entice us to focus our hearts on them instead of on God. And as we already noted, he will try to use our circumstances to make us bitter and blame God or others for our pain.

But, Satan isn't our worst enemy. The only tools Satan has are lies and half-truths. He has no real power over those who are in Christ. The only way he has power over us is if we believe his lies.

Our worst enemy is ourselves. **I am my own worst enemy.** Repeat after me, **I am my own worst enemy.** I am the one who has the power to choose right or wrong. As James says, I am tempted to do wrong when I am lured and enticed by my own desires. And the reason I am drawn to those false gods is because I have my heart set on them. That's what Paul says in Colossians 3.

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Jesus said, "**where your treasure is, there will your heart be also**" (Matthew 6:21).

For much of the time I had my business my heart was not set on God. I started out well. I was simply buying time while I waited for God to show me what my next step should be towards getting into "full-time vocational ministry." At the time, I thought it was just a step along the way. I just wanted to make a living. But then I gained some success and began to believe my own press, and slowly my allegiance turned from God to wealth, and status. The more I got, the more I wanted. I was never satisfied with what I had.

Paul said to Timothy, his young protégé,

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1 Timothy 6:9–10 (ESV)

⁹ But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

If your goal is to get rich for the sake of riches and the sense of worth you will feel from it, and to justify your existence, it will lead you to destruction. I know that from experience. We were created for relationship with God. And whenever we replace the pursuit of God with the pursuit of something else we dig our own grave. Little by little, we destroy the very fabric of our being.

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¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Sometimes when we give in to sin we say, "I don't know how it happened. I just sort of fell into it." Don't fool yourself. Nobody just falls into sin. It is a deliberate act of the will. James says we start out by playing with temptation in our minds. We look at something, whether it is money, possessions, position, or a person. We wonder in our minds what it would be like to have it. We play around with it in our daydreams. We mull it over. As we do that the temptation grows to the point where we think we can't live without it. We have to have it, and so we start to justify in our minds why we deserve it. Why we are entitled, and then, James

says it gives birth to sin that leads to destruction. It may start out innocuously, and subtly, but it grows into something that will destroy us and our relationships.

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I am my own worst enemy. Repeat after me, **I am my own worst enemy.** That is why it is so important for us to stay in the Word, to be open to correction, to recognize our limitations, and to recognize that those shiny things we chase after are illusions. We think they will satisfy, but once we get them, we realize they are not enough. We always want more. The fact is, those things we chase after are mere shadows of the real thing. What we are really after, only God can give us.

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¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Ruthie and I were part of a mission team to Mexico many years ago. When we were there almost everybody on our team bought cheap sunglasses and watches that looked like very expensive merchandise. They all knew they were fakes, but \$10 for what looked like \$150 sunglasses and \$15 for a watch that looked like a \$500 Rolex seemed like a no-brainer. Well, by the time we got back to Canada, the paint had peeled off the sunglasses, and the watches had stopped working. They looked like the real thing but lacked any real substance.

We deceive ourselves by chasing after false gods that are mere shadows of the real thing. Wealth, power, position, illicit relationships, or anything we pursue for the purpose of justifying our existence, are mere shadows of the real thing. **Every good and perfect gift is from God.** He has good things for us. Those other things we lull ourselves into believing are worthy of our pursuits, are really cheap substitutes for the true joy that is ours in Christ.

God, does not change like a shadow that moves depending on how low the sun is in the horizon. God is always the same. He always has good things for us. We never have to wonder if he is going to be the same today as he was two thousand years ago. The same promises he gave to the disciples who walked with Jesus remain for us.

The only way we can resist the temptation to chase after false gods is to know that there is something better in the real thing. God only has our best in mind. If we really knew just how true this is we would turn from those other things and chase hard after him.

In the Daily Bread on July 10th, 1999 Nancy Spiegelberg wrote a prayer to God,

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***Lord, I crawled across the bareness to you with my empty cup, uncertain in asking any small drop of refreshment. If only I had known you better. I'd have come running with a bucket.*³**

Where is your heart at, friends? Are you investing eternally, or are you trying to find meaning in things that will only end up in the landfill? And like I said, there is nothing wrong with

³ Nancy Spiegelberg, "Bibles and Buckets," Our Daily Bread (7-10-99)

owning stuff, or being wealthy. The problem comes when we try to use these things to give us something that only God can give.

If we really knew how good God is, all of those things would fade away into the background. All the pursuits of this earth do not compare at all with the good life God has for us. One day with him is better than a thousand elsewhere.

We are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper together now. Take a couple minutes of complete silence and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart. Ask him to stick his probe in to discover if there is anything that is getting in the way of your relationship with him or others and then resolve to make it right. Do the next right thing and then trust God.



God's Upside Down Economy

James 1:9-18

Week of October 4th, 2015

Objective of this study: To ask the Holy Spirit to check my heart to discern if anything has become more important than my relationship with God.

[Remember, the main goal of each Growth Group is to allow God's Word to change your heart so that others would see Jesus in you and be likewise changed to be like him. He wants to change the world through us]

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silence asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. After the five minutes have someone interrupt the silence and read Psalm 51 [in a contemporary translation] meditatively to the group. Pause after each phrase letting God speak to you.
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

Have you ever purchased something that turned out to be less than what it was advertised to be?

Word/Work (60-90 minutes)

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read James 1:9-18; 1 Timothy 6:3-10; Colossians 3:1-6
3. How has it been going living by the "Four Peas?" :-)
 1. Prepare for Trials
 2. Persevere through the Trials
 3. Procure God's Wisdom in the Trial
 4. Purposefully trust God for the Outcome of the Trial

The Problem

Sermon Quote: ***"One of the reasons that some people are unhappy is because they compare themselves to others."***

4. Consider James' discourse about the temptation to assess people's value (yours or others') based on financial net worth. Describe your struggle with this. How has comparing yourself with others affected your happiness?

5. In James 1:9-10 it says, ***⁹Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.*** What do you think that means, and how can we practically do it?
6. How is covetousness (or greed) like idolatry? (Colossians 3:1-6) What's the great deception?

Sermon Quote: ***“Satan will try to use the trials we experience to lead us away from God. God uses those same trials to bring us closer, to cause us to trust him more. There is a huge difference between the motive of God and that of Satan... [Satan] will try to use our circumstances to make us bitter and blame God or others for our pain... So, the same trial, depending on our response to it, can strengthen our faith, or weaken it.”***

7. Share how you have experienced this dynamic of the decision to trust God or not. And what were the results?
8. What kinds of things does Satan use to tempt **you**, to focus your heart away from God?
9. Think about the **process** of temptation James describes in verses 13-15. Can you relate to that? How so?

The Solution

10. From verses 16-18, what's the solution? (Read also, Psalm 34:8) If you really believed this from your heart what difference would it make in your responses to trials, your growth, and your joy?

Sermon Quote: ***“That is why it is so important for us to stay in the Word, to be open to correction, to recognize our limitations, and to recognize that those shiny things we chase after are illusions. We think they will satisfy, but once we get them, we realize they are not enough. We always want more. The fact is, those things we chase after are mere shadows of the real thing. What we are really after, only God can give us.”***

11. How can you manage the resources God has given you to make eternal investments? What changes do you need to make?