

| 7.12.21

The Letter of James

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

There are 27 books in the New Testament (although technically only 6 are books and 21 of them are letters) – and the letter that gets the most heat (because it’s so different from the rest of the books and doesn’t ‘fit in’) is the Letter of James...

And I say that because, unlike the Gospel writers and unlike Paul’s letters, James seems to teach that it’s not enough to simply ‘believe’ in Jesus Christ – but to ‘have faith’ (according to James – who some have traditionally believed to be the Brother of Jesus) one must also do good works... in other words, it doesn’t matter what you *say* you believe (if it isn’t backed up with actions)...

This is why he is most often quoted as saying in James 2:14, “*Faith without works is dead*”... and in our second reading this morning in James 1:22 he says, “*But be doers of the Word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves*”... in other words, if you’re going to “*talk the talk*” you have to “*walk the walk*” (is what James is saying)...

Now in many ways I sort of agree with James (and I think his theology makes sense to some degree)... the problem is that for Protestants we are taught that it is our “faith that saves us – not our works”...

This is why when Martin Luther was developing (his own theology) – he considered getting rid of James (because as he said, “There’s no Gospel in the Letter of James”)... in other words, if God is still judging us on how we live our lives and how many good deeds we do (then what’s the Good News for most of us?)...

And if the way to God is paved in good deeds (then what about the sinner who’s still in a prison of addiction – or any one of us who fall astray from time to time? – or the one with the mustard seed size of faith who comes to church regularly (but hasn’t done a single thing with her faith since the sixth grade?) – or what about the one who comes to faith late in life (just before the door closes – leaving behind a trail of broken dreams, broken promises – and few if any – good deeds?)... what chance do they have of being saved – if salvation is measured on performance?... and how many good deeds would ever be enough (to earn the love of our Lord and Savior?)...

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But maybe James isn't saying that... maybe James is important (not because he steps in line with the rest of the writers of the New Testament) but maybe he's important (because he reminds us that words alone do not put food in the mouths of the hungry... and words don't pay attention to a lonely or marginalized person – words don't visit one of our brothers or sisters who sit in prison (struggling to find hope that they can have a second chance)– and words don't give a hand to those in need... and just as words can be cheap – so can God's Grace become cheap (if we're not giving it away – so that someone else can see the light)...

Because if WE don't (wake up) and pass on the things of God – who will?...

You know, I was thinking on Friday night of how the Christian teachings really touched me (at a certain point in my own life when I was finally ready to meet Jesus – talk about religion – but most importantly, use my faith to grow into becoming a better person)... I knew I believed in Jesus (but at first I didn't know what to do with my faith)... I prayed – I meditated – I went to church – I read the Bible – I fasted... but I couldn't see how I could use my faith in the world (and make a difference)...

And I'll tell you the truth – I wanted to *walk the walk*.. (I just didn't know where to start)...

And so I made the deadly mistake of asking my pastor if he needed any help at the church (and before I knew it I was ushering, lecturing, cleaning the parking lot... they even had me teaching Sunday school)... and I loved it... and I loved the church – and the people – and how almost all of them had something 'uniquely odd' about them – while being the most generous (kind-hearted) people you'll ever meet...

And it was from that little church that I found my own way to *walk the walk*... and no – I didn't try to become morally or spiritually perfect (and I knew that sin would still wage it's war against my conscience, my allegiances, and at times my faith)...

But what I did do was try different things... and one thing I used to do (early on in my walk with the Lord) was bring muffins with me into NYC (and I would go to Thompkins Square Park) and wherever there were addicts or homeless people I would try to be a 'non-anxious presence – be cool with the people – and then just tell them something simple about God loving everyone...

and before they could ever roll their eyes (I had a muffin in every hand)...

And do you know what the reward is *in doing good deeds?*... it's not heaven... the reward is that this is where we go to meet Jesus (and where God not only becomes real – but where our faith grows)...

This is why we *read* in Matthew 25:39 the disciples ask Jesus, “*When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?*” and “*The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’*”... and that is the reward... in doing good for the sake of the Kingdom of God (it's there that we meet Jesus)... and when you begin to meet Jesus on pathways of life (that's when your faith also begins to grow)... and when your faith begins to grow (God can do amazing things with your life and introduce you to the most amazing people you'll ever meet)...

And maybe that's what James was trying to get at in his letter... that the reward for doing good works (is not heaven) but it's how we cleanse our heart (and come to know Jesus in a very real way)... in a way that transforms and renews...

And if your faith **does not include** good works – I think James would ask the follow-up question – “Then what is the point of having it at all?”... Is it only meant to serve you and your needs?... or does one have faith - ‘*to change the world*’?...

“That” I think James would say, “is what you have to decide for yourself”... what will you do with your faith?...

You know, this week as I was thinking about how we might approach a faith that is centered upon doing good works (or perhaps – more good works than we are doing now) I thought of how one of the dangers of doing good works (is that we might only do them so that we can be recognized – or we do them only to make ourselves feel better about ourselves – or in hopes of receiving God's favor)...

And then I remembered a story I once heard (that was told by a rabbi who was teaching his students)... and one of the claims of the rabbi was that “everything in the world was created by God to be appreciated – and all things are meant to teach us a lesson”...

Hearing this teaching one of the students in the back of the room raised his hand and asked, “What can we learn from an Atheist?... And why did God create them?”...

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The rabbi responded by saying, *“God created atheists to teach us the most important lesson of them all — the lesson of true compassion. You see, when an atheist performs an act of charity, visits someone who is sick, helps someone in need, and cares for the world, he is not doing so because of some religious teaching. He does not believe that God commanded him to perform this act. In fact, he does not believe in God at all, so his acts are based on an inner sense of morality. And look at the kindness he can bestow upon others simply because he feels it to be right.”*

“This means,” the rabbi continued *“that when someone reaches out to you for help, you should never just throw around cheap words and say ‘I pray that God will help you.’ ... Instead for the moment, you should become like the atheist, imagine that there is no God who can help, and then say ‘I will help you.’”...*

Gang, let me remind you that you’re already loved by God – you’re already blessed with the things you need to serve our loving Father in Heaven – but it’s up to you to decide what you will do with your faith... will you keep it all to yourself and lock it away (like the man that Jesus tells us about who hid his talent in the ground for safekeeping) – or will you always strive to meet Jesus (in both word and in deed)?...
the choice is always up to you...

And can I just offer one suggestion – if God has spoken to you this morning (or this past week) and you know where you can offer good – why not do it?... why not look for Jesus (so that you can grow even deeper in your faith)?...

May the goodness of God be made known through our good deeds... may our actions always speak louder than our words... and may our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (be our Light and our constant hope) in this world...

In Jesus’ name we pray...

Amen!