

JAMES 1:17-27 AND MARK 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
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I thought I might preach about the squabble over pots and pans and dirty hands in the Mark reading. This is the kind of reading we need to hide from our children and grandchildren or else they will think they have a Biblical mandate for not helping with washing dishes or washing their hands. Not really. The point of the passage is some of our Lord's contemporaries were more interested in the letter of the Law than the spirit of the Law. They get their comeuppance. Basically, Jesus is asking what is more important: ritual purity or feeding the hungry? I am going to turn you loose with this text and you can write your own sermon on it. That's because I am going to focus on James today.

James is a practical little letter, offering advice on everything from taming the tongue to how to usher properly (briefly, don't play favorites by showing the family with bling the best seats and scooting the poor family to the back row of the balcony).

There's a lot of wisdom in James, along with good moral advice. James gives us a helpful summary of how to look at everyday ethics, such as sharing our wealth, dealing with anger, caring for widows and orphans, and having high moral standards. His letter is a practical application of the Sermon on the Mount.

Who was James? We know from Mark 6:3 that he was the half-brother of Jesus, along with Joses, Judas, Simon, and several unnamed sisters. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, James became the leader of the early Jesus Movement in Jerusalem, which was primarily Jewish. These were tough times for the early Jesus Movement, with famine, persecution, and poverty common. We learn from Acts 15 that James was instrumental in working out a settlement with Paul and others so that Gentile Christians did not have to observe the Law of Moses in order to be considered followers of Jesus. James was revered as a holy person for his leadership, courage, and wisdom. That wisdom is condensed in the little book that carries his name. In pithy proverbs and easily memorized sayings, James encourages members of the early Jesus Movement to live by the Torah as Jesus preached and taught, namely to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Let's jump into James. Chapter one sets the tone for the rest of the book. Remember, the context of the book is suffering. Right out of the gate James tells us that life is hard. Bad things happen to good people all the time. Indeed, James was flung from the Temple in either the year 62 or 69 and then beaten to death. But what's important, James tells us, is how we respond when bad things happen.

Does our faith hold us up? Or does our faith fold up? James tells us that the testing of our faith can lead to endurance; and endurance reveals maturity and character.

Every perfect gift, he says, is from above and we are the first fruits of this perfection. Being perfect sounds out of our reach, you might think. Like, say, Waterford crystal. Beautiful but brittle. Prone to break so we put it in a cabinet and only look at it. When James speaks of perfection he is talking about something organic and dynamic that engages life. Think of wholeness and integrity. That's what we need, especially when we are broken. That's what God offers us in times that try our faith. God gives wisdom to navigate through life's troubles. The wisdom to have faith and trust, even though outward events would seem to contradict such hope. In other words, God is present even when things are crashing down on us and others. The temptation, however, is to fold up. Don't do that, James warns.

Gustav Aulen, a great Scandinavian theologian of the last century, is reputed to have said: God does not will everything that happens, but in everything that happens God has a will. I, for one, have bet my life on those words. God does not will that hundreds of thousands of people die of Covid-19. God does not will that people get drunk and kill innocent people in car crashes. God does not will that crazed people fire guns into crowds. No. Not at all. But God wills that we do something when tragedies occur and not just wring our hands in despair. Our task is to find God's will in these tragedies. Then to do what we discern God is asking of us.

How do we discern God's will? We welcome God's implanted word into our lives. We embody what Jesus taught, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. Here's how James puts:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

That's the King James Version and I love it for a particular reason. For 19 years I sat under those words as Dean of St. Peter's Cathedral. The next time you are there, look up at the polychromed gothic inscription around the ceiling above the altar and choir. There you will see these inspiring words.

We discern God's will by trusting God, the Father of lights, as James refers to him. God is steady and reliable as the north star. You'll remember that light and darkness are important themes in the Scriptures. In the struggle between light and darkness, God is like our north star, so that we can safely navigate through the most difficult straits of life.

When James tells members of the early Jesus Movement that they are the "first fruits of (God's) creatures," he is letting them know that they are exceptional, that God finds great pleasure in them. These early Christians were not only precious to God, but also announced the start of a great harvest, namely a community that will spread the good news of Jesus by word and deed through the centuries.

I want to emphasize word and deed. It's one thing to talk and sing nice things and then go home and do nothing. There is another crucial step. We have to act. We have to do something. The word propels us to act. Otherwise we are phonies.

I like the way Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, translates today's text about hearing and doing:

Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear!

He continues:

Anyone who sets himself up as "religious" by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.

When bad things happen to good people, good people get going. They turn to Scripture, prayer, and their Christian community to discern God's will for them. Then they get into action. This little book offers a big and beautiful reminder that God is with us in life's struggles. God's word, incarnate in Jesus, is our steady north star. We only need to trust. To have faith.

It would be good to immerse ourselves in James. There's a lot of wisdom in this book, along with good moral advice. James gives us a picture of what the Sermon on the Mount looks like in action. Generally, I don't assign homework, but this week I am going to do that. Don't worry. There's no test. Not even a paper. This week, take out your Bible and read James. It's brief. Just five chapters. It will take you no more than 15-20 minutes, but you will be glad that you did. Amen.