



FIVE MESSAGES FROM BISHOP JAMES OF JERUSALEM

Every three years during the month of September, our church places before us five excerpts from the Epistle of James. Today, we listened to the fifth message. As we end this month of listening to James, I thought I would pick a verse or message from each of the five weeks for us to ponder.

- **Week one.** James told us that “we must be *doers* of the word and *not just hearers*”. It is easy to come to church and *listen* to God’s word, or to gather in a small group and *talk* about God’s word or *read* the Bible privately in our home or in our adoration chapel. But it is quite another thing to *act* on God’s word. In my commentary on the Sunday readings that small groups use, there is always a piece called *Responding to God’s Word*. The question in this section usually asks: “Name one way you can *act* on this week’s reading”. Whenever I sit in on a small group, I find that this is the question most participants struggle with. Yet, it is the most important question of all. When it comes to scripture, I can be a great scholar, but a little illiterate woman living in the slums of some Third World country may well have a better understanding of the word because of her willingness to *act* on what she hears.

- **Week two.** James told us to “*show no partiality...*” Yet how many of us *act* on that word. To what extent do we treat *all* people equally? How often do we judge some people to be more important and more deserving of our attention just because of the way they dress, because of the status or rank in society, because of the kind of house they live in etc. “Showing no partiality” is not an easy message to live as all of you who volunteer at Daily Bread, the Thrift Shop and Social Concerns know well. It is not easy to treat all who enter these places as our brothers and sisters equal in dignity and importance before God.

- **Week three.** Bishop James of Jerusalem spoke about the connection between faith and good works. He said: “Faith of itself, if it does not have good works is dead.” True faith expresses itself in the way we live our lives, the way we relate to people, especially the poor and those who are different from us. Faith expresses itself in the way we spend our time, treasure and talent. As you

reflect back over the past week, can you name one way that you demonstrated your faith in some good work?

- **Week four.** James spoke about the “inner cravings” that can get us into a lot of trouble. The reading started with: “Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice.” He also said that “wars and conflicts come from within”. This is also a very challenging message. All of us know that when we or others are not able to discipline our emotions, a lot of conflict erupts. We might ask ourselves: What emotion do we have the toughest time dealing with?

- **Week five.** I repeat here the whole second reading from James.

*Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your
impending miseries.
Your wealth has rotted away,
your clothes have become moth-eaten, your gold
and silver have corroded,
and that corrosion will be a testimony against you;
it will devour your flesh like a fire.
You have stored up treasure for the last days.
Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers who
harvested your fields are crying aloud;
and the cries of the harvesters have reached
the ears of the Lord of hosts.
You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure;
you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter.
You have condemned;
you have murdered the righteous one;
he offers you no resistance.*

In this reading, James harshly condemns the rich for failing to share their wealth with those in need. He also condemns the rich for getting rich by paying their employees an unjust wage.

We might ask: what do we *feel* and *think* when we listen to or read the above scripture verses? We might think “thank God that I am not one of those rich ones”.

But wealth, like most things, is relative. When we place ourselves in the *global* village that we live in, all of us are among the rich, even if some are much richer than others. When we even compare ourselves to those who come into our *Social Concerns* office, we are rich. It is not our wealth that will condemn us. Rather, it is our failure to *share* it. It is our failure to bless others with the blessings we have received from on high.

When it comes to giving, the invitation is always to ‘do the math’. The Bible speaks about giving a tithe of our income to God’s work. Our Church speaks about giving 5% to the Church and 5% to the poor. The question is: how willing are we to do the math? In doing so, we can measure more accurately how generous we are and to what extent church and the poor figure in our financial priorities. James’ tough words in today’s second reading are directed towards those who are failing to share their blessings. The gospel always makes a distinction between the greedy rich and the giving rich. In recent conversations with parishioners, some have said they wish that they had given more money away rather than losing it in the stock market.

As you know, at the parish we are gradually moving towards setting aside 10% of our offertory income to help the poor and poor churches. This year 8% of the offertory will go to outreach. Frankly, at times personally and as a pastor, I am tempted to hold back rationalizing that we have too many needs of our own.

Other verses we didn’t hear

In chapter three, James has a famous piece on “sins of the tongue”. The following is a translation by Eugene Peterson, a translation that sometimes brings the biblical text to life.

*A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse.
A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of
a skilled captain sets a course in the face
of the strongest winds.*

*A word out of your mouth may seem of no account,
but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it!*

*It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire.
A careless or wrongly placed word out of your
mouth can do that.*

*By our speech we can ruin the work,
turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation,
send the whole world up in smoke
and go up in smoke with it,
smoke right from the pit of hell.*

This is scary:

*You can tame a tiger, but you can’t tame a tongue—it’s
never been done.*

*The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer.
with our tongues we bless God our Father;
With the same tongues we curse the very men and
women he made in his image.*

Curses and blessings out of the same mouth!

James 3:3-10

Sins of the tongue are so common today and often rarely confessed. I often think it is curious that people will not receive communion in their hands, but only on their

tongue. Yet, we sin a lot more with our tongue than with our hands.

I sometimes say to the children at school or at religious education, think for a moment what it would be like *not* to be able to use the gift of speech. Think of people who have suffered from a stroke. What would that be like? Would we not promise the Lord to never again misuse our tongue if he gave us back the gift of speech? Let us try very hard this week to use the wonderful gift of speech to only praise God and speak well of others.

Roots of the sacrament of the sick

In Catholic theology, the biblical roots for the sacrament of the sick is found in James. He writes:

If anyone among you is sick, he should summon the priests of the Church, and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the Name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The servant prayer of a righteous person is very powerful (Jas 5:14-16).

Despite James’ words which we revere as the word of God, all too often when someone is sick among us, we do not call in the priests of the Church to anoint them and pray over them. In our Church family we should be doing a lot more praying with the sick and each other than we currently do.

Final words

Pastor James ends his letter with these words:

*My brothers,
if one of you strays away from the truth,
and another brings him back to it,
he may be sure that anyone who can bring back
a sinner from the wrong way that he has taken
will be saving a soul from death
and covering up a great number of sins.*

(JB translation)

Save a soul or bring someone back to God or Church and a multitude of your sins will be taken care of. Who wouldn’t want that deal.

Have a blessed week,

