



THE LETTERS OF JAMES CHALLENGES US TO BE DOERS OF THE WORD AND NOT JUST HEARERS.

Every three years in the month of September, we listen to five passages from the Epistle of St. James. As we shall see, James is one of the easiest books of the New Testament to read. It is also one of the most practical —giving us lots of practical advice on how to live the Christian life.

Before we look at today's reading, it may be of interest to you to know that this Epistle was not readily accepted into the Canon of the New Testament. In fact, it was not accepted until the mid-fourth century. Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, intensely disliked the Epistle of James. Why? He had several reasons. First, in Luther's opinion it placed way too much emphasis on the role of *good works* in our justification. Second, it gives no instruction or mention of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. Third, James only mentions Christ twice. If Luther had his way, he would have tossed this 'Epistle of straw' out of the New Testament.

The Faith and Good Works Issue

Ever since Luther attacked James for his emphasis on good works, Lutherans and Catholics have fought about the role of faith and good works in our salvation or justification.

Following the lead of Paul, Lutherans insist that we are saved only by placing our faith in our Savior, Jesus Christ. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes:

It is by grace that you have been saved, through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift from God; not by anything that you have done, so that nobody can claim the credit. We are God's work of art, created in Jesus Christ to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it.

It seems pretty clear from the above verses and many other verses found in Romans and Galatians, that our salvation depends totally on our faith in Jesus. Then we turn to James and we listen to the following words:

My brothers, what good is it to profess faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save one, has it? Show me your faith without works, and I will show you the faith that underlies my works! . . . Be assured then, that faith without works is as dead as a body without breath. 2:14-26

In the above passage, James is very clear that faith that does not express itself in good works is dead and useless. So who

is right, Paul or James? The Lutherans or Catholics? The good news is that about seven or eight years ago, Lutheran and Catholic theologians have been able to hammer out a statement that both can agree on when it comes to the "faith and good works issue". Briefly, the statement says that we are saved or justified by the saving work of Christ in whom we place our faith and trust. In no way can we *earn* our salvation through good works. Salvation is the free gift of God to those who accept Christ. Having said that, both Catholics and Lutherans agree with James that a true faith must express itself in good works. When we become aware of the wonderful sacrifice of Christ and accept him into our lives, we are moved to perform good works out of gratitude. Our good works do not save us. Rather they are the result or fruit of our relationship with Christ.

Today's Reading

Today's reading from James is very beautiful and challenging. I would like to comment on a few verses in it. James writes:

Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls.

In this beautiful verse, James urges us to humbly open our minds and hearts to God's word. Consciously, but more often unconsciously, we may resist welcoming God's word in our lives. Why? We are afraid of what it may ask of us. Hence, it is grace when we can humbly open our hearts to God's word.

Study Guides

We can benefit spiritually by simply reading the Bible without any study guides. In fact, study guides can get in our way in that they may keep us in our heads. With a study guide, the Bible may become a 'head-trip' and not a 'soul-trip'. With or without a study guide, we want the Bible to *touch our hearts and then to move us to action.*

On the other hand, study guides can be a tremendous help especially to those of us who are a bit curious about the meaning of certain texts. Let's face it, there are thousands of verses in the Bible that can leave us scratching our heads, wondering what is God saying to us. In such moments good study guides can be a wonderful help.

As many of you know by now, William Barclay's Daily Bible Series on the books of the New Testament are a big favorite of mine when it comes to study guides on scripture. If interested in checking out Barclay's study guide, consider getting a copy of his commentary on Mark - the Gospel we are reading in church this year during cycle B. There may be a copy in our parish library or at the parish office.

Bible Study Available at Ascension

This fall there will be two opportunities to study the Book of Genesis beginning this Wednesday, Sept 6th at 9 AM and 7 PM in room 305 of the Ministry Center.

Consider Joining a Small Christian Community for Six Weeks

In addition to the above Bible Study Groups, we have a number of small groups that meet in the homes of parishioners to read and share on the readings for the coming Sunday. We have *ongoing* groups that meet all year long and we have *seasonal* groups that meet for six weeks in the Fall and during Lent. I provide a *Guide* for these groups. If interested in looking at this weekly guide, you can check it out on our website: www.ascensioncatholic.net. Then click on *Fr. Tobin's Commentary on the Sunday Readings*. People who join these groups testify that they are an excellent way for them:

- To meet new people
- To become more acquainted with the scriptures.

No previous knowledge of the Bible is required to join any of the above mentioned groups. The only requirement is a **humble heart** that is ready to welcome the Word of God. Next weekend, there will be an opportunity to sign up to join a small group during the upcoming Fall Season - October 15 through November 26th.

The Virtue of Humility

Since James mentions the importance of *humility* when it comes to scripture, I would like to share with you some reflections on humility and how this virtue can be a tremendous asset to us in our relationship with God and others. Spiritual masters have always stated that humility is the *foundation virtue of the spiritual life*. Without humility, pride will reign in our lives. In her *Magnificat*, Mary says that ‘God has routed the proud of heart—but the hungry (or humble) he has filled with good things’. Lk 1:51

In addition to being the *foundational virtue* of the spiritual life, I have discovered over the years that humility is also a wonderful *relational* virtue—the practice of which will enhance not only our relationship with God but also with others.

The following are some of the ways the practice of humility can help our *relationship* with **God**:

- St. Teresa of Avila defines humility as truth. When it comes to God and us, a most basic truth is that God is the Creator and we are the creatures. Sometimes consciously or more often *unconsciously* we may think we are God. Of course, we would never say ‘I am God’. But, we may *act as if* we are God. We do this when we act as if we are in total control of our lives and when we act as if we don’t need anybody, not even God. Humility helps us to remember that ‘without God, we are nothing’. I wonder how many people accept that simple truth - ‘without God we are nothing’. What do I mean by this? For starters I mean that if God stopped breathing his life into us for a moment, we would dissolve. Humility helps me to remember that I am *dependent* on God for *every moment of every day*. Pride and a spirit of self-sufficiency will keep us from wanting to depend on anyone, including God. A true spirit of humility helps us to remember how much we are totally dependent on God. Humility helps us to have a childlike trust in God. Humility helps us to turn to God at any moment of any day.

- Humility helps us to accept God’s mercy after we have messed up big time. Some people tend to think that some sins are unforgivable and others often have a hard time forgiving themselves. Often the obstacle is pride. When humility is active in our lives, we are very aware that we could commit any sin given the right set of circumstances. Humility helps me to accept our humanity especially when we fail big time.

The following are some ways that humility can help our *relationship with others*. From the following examples we can see the vital importance and practical nature of this foundational virtue of the spiritual life.

- Humility helps us to admit we were wrong in a particular situation. This is *so hard* for so many people and perhaps for all of us on occasion. You would think that admitting we are wrong was a huge offense against God and humanity.
- Humility enables us to verbalize the most healing words in the English language: “I am sorry. Please forgive me.” Just think of how many relationships are weakened and wounded because of people’s refusal and inability to sincerely utter these words. How often do we hear it said: “He/she didn’t even say he was sorry.” On the other hand, we can think of all the wounded relationships that are healed because of a genuine admission of wrongdoing and a genuine plea for forgiveness. Of course, if the other person does not accept our expression of

sorrow that is their problem. We only have power, with the grace of God, to change ourselves.

- Humility helps us to keep our egos in check when they can get us in trouble in a one-on-one relationships or in meetings. Just think of the many meetings that are made very difficult because one or more of the participants have oversized egos.
- Humility can help us to cope when we are not recognized or appreciated for the good we may have done. Years ago I remember reading a book called *Darkness in the Marketplace*. One of the chapters was named *Desire to be Overlooked*. I think that all or nearly all of us like to be appreciated now and again. But, when overlooked we can remember that God sees our good deeds and motives and he is the one that really counts.
- Humility helps me to acknowledge our strengths. False humility causes us to deny our giftedness in particular areas.

I am sure that the practice of humility can help us in other ways not mentioned above. But the above list shows us just how important this particular virtue is.

True and False Religion

In some translations of the Bible one section in James 1:19-27 is called “true and false religion”. A portion of today’s reading is taken from this section.

*Be doers of the word and not hearers only,
Deluding yourselves. Religion that is pure
and undefiled before God and the Father is this:
To care for orphans and widows in their affliction
And to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

Unfortunately, the compilers of the lectionary decided to omit one verse from the section. It has to do with controlling one’s tongue. I will return to it later. James would be very impatient with us if we only *discussed* scripture. He would be the first to say to us: “Okay, now what are you going to do about the word you have discussed?” How are you going to put it into practice? Don’t tell me you have faith if your faith is not impacting the way you live your daily life. Hence the exhortation in today’s reading to: *Be doers of the word and not just hearers*.

Then James tells his readers *how* they can act on the word of God: *care for orphans and widows and keep oneself unstained by the world*. Widows and orphans were two of the most neglected groups in James time.

As I said above it is unfortunate that the verse right before the one on caring for the widows and orphans

was omitted when this reading was being selected. They omitted verse (26) states:

*If a person who does not control his tongue
imagines that he is devout, he is self-deceived;
his worship is pointless.*

In an age when ‘sins of the tongue’ are quiet widespread, it is a pity the above verse was omitted. We might think that misuse or abuse of the tongue is not a big deal, but James would disagree. He says sins of the tongue nullifies our worship before God. What are some examples of sins of the tongue. Obvious examples are using bad language, telling dirty jokes, damaging another’s good name, emotionally abusing members of one’s family or employees or co-workers, the kind of shouting and name calling that goes on between people on ‘the left’ and on ‘the right’ in both political and religious debates

For some people ‘sins of the tongue’ is almost an addiction. It is as if they cannot get control over this area of their lives. If this is a problem for you, I offer the following threefold plan as one way to help. The following can be applied to any area of our lives where we are weak.

- *Step One:* Humbly admit your powerlessness in this area of your life and proclaim faith in God’s power to help you. It’s the old axiom: “*I can’t, but God can*”. I suggest that we begin, ideally on our knees, our day with the following prayer or one like it: “*Jesus I acknowledge my weakness in this area of my life. But, I also believe in your power to help me. Please help me today to control my tongue and only use it to bless you and others.*”
- *Step Two:* Try hard all day to control ones tongue.
- *Step Three:* At night look back and see how we did. Give thanks for the successes. Ask forgiveness for the failures. Ask for the grace to do better tomorrow.

If we sincerely work the above three step plan, we will be pleasantly surprised at how God will help us to have victory in an area of weakness and sin.

Have a great week,

