

04/22/12 (2)

"Looking in the Mirror at Perfection" (James #1)

James 1:1-18, 2:21-24; Genesis 22:1-17

I. JAMES BEGINS HIS LETTER TO THE CHURCH MEMBERS IN A WARM AND AFFECTION MANNER...

“*GREETINGS! COUNT IT ALL JOY, MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS...*”

A. ***He writes to a group of Christians who are being subjected to unbelievable pain.***

1. The Jews hate them, and the Romans are after them to kill every last one. They are treated like poisonous vermin.
2. In order to survive, the Christian churches at the end of the first century dispersed and fled to distant Mediterranean lands.
3. Here in the Roman underground is one small gathering of believers who have managed to stay together. Survival is a day-to-day thing.
4. A good pastor with good people skills knows how to comfort those in pain, James is skilled in strengthening them for their daily trials.
 - a. Who is this writer? the brother of Jesus, one of the apostles, or just a very loving, caring pastor who is also hurting?
5. The Pastoral letter of James is easy to find. Go to the Letter of Hebrews toward the end of your Bible.
 - a. Before Hebrews are 3 pastoral letters: Timothy, Titus and the short letter to Philemon.
 - b. And after Hebrews are letters from 4 more pastors or apostles: James, then the letters of Peter and John.
 - c. The short letter of Jude is found before the book of Revelation.
 - d. So then, sandwiching Hebrews are first, 3 pastoral letters, the third being the short book of Philemon; and after Hebrews, 4 pastoral letters, the fourth being the short book of Jude.

(PAUSE)

B. ***James says, Look at it this way: these temptations and unbelievable hardships you are going through right now are an opportunity for joy!***

1. James has a most unusual interpretation of Christian joy, as do each of those letter-writers in the last few books of the New Testament, where people in the church are being beaten, arrested, and killed.
2. My favorite pastor to the persecuted church is Peter: “*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you... But rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:12-13).*
3. 1 John says in his opening sentences: “...we are writing this that our joy may be complete.”

C. ***But now James unbelievably shifts quickly to the struggles of the world’s poor!***

1. Because you suffer for your faith, how then can you come to church on Sunday and ignore the hopeless suffering of the humble poor?
 - a. They are being tested the same as you—how can you think you are any different in God’s eyes?
2. And James, who is really not a people person pastor, and not noted for his tact, goes after the very-rich people in his congregation.
 - a. He nails them not once, but 3 times in his letter.
 - b. He addresses them as if they are living in the time of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in 18th century France, who just looked

- down at those who had no bread and said, "Let them eat cake."
3. Commentators Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church observe that the letter of James fails to open with the traditional blessing of "*Grace, mercy, and peace,*" because this man intends to stir things up!
 4. *[This section was omitted from my preaching on April 22.] One Sunday morning back in May, 1969, James Foreman walked down the center aisle of the fashionable Riverside Presbyterian Church in New York City. It was the home congregation of many affluent, successful, white business leaders— what we call today an aristocratic church.*
 - a. *In the language of church sociologist Israel Galindo, an aristocratic church is the powerful big city church that is entrenched, well-endowed, where nothing ever changes.*
 - b. *So James Foreman, a member of the Black Panthers, the Executive Secretary of SNCC or the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Council, the man who had been involved in an incident of police brutality with the Los Angeles Police force and suffered an emotional breakdown, on that Sunday in May he delivered his "Black Manifesto," and he disrupted worship!*
 - c. *He demanded \$500 million in reparations from white churches for the injustices done to African Americans through the years.*
 - d. *Imagine how that fell like a bombshell on that all-white church, and on our entire white majority Presbyterian denomination!*
 - e. *Ernie Campbell the pastor at Riverside Church handled it tactfully and carefully. The members responded rather than reacted. They studied the issues, spoke with the black community, and pledged a fixed percentage of its annual income to anti-poverty efforts.*
 - f. *James Foreman devoted his life to empowering poor black people, working for their economic development. (PAUSE)*

II. WHERE IS OUR NEW TESTAMENT LETTER-WRITER JAMES GOING HERE?

- A. ***He asks: what is God's role in our struggles in life? Do you think God is the one who puts these hardships and tests before us?***
 1. Is this economic contest between poor and rich, between justice and mercy, something we may blame on God or is it our own fault?
 2. He wants us as the church to radically shift our perspective, to now see things the way God sees them!
 - a. to see the poor, the truly oppressed literally as God sees them.
 - b. James mentions Jesus Christ two times in two seemingly innocuous references.
 - c. James is speaking to the many churches in Miles City—some 30 congregations—who refuse to work together to do anything to address our problem of transient poverty and hunger!
 3. In the first line of this letter, James identifies himself as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," but not as an apostle.
 - a. This is important, for in the mind of James, he stands in solidarity as a servant like Jesus did, with all the people who suffered out of their desperate need.

- b. Strangely, there is no mention of Jesus' sacrifice and death for our salvation in this short letter, yet there are many links or obvious references to Gospel texts.

B. ***This hardship is all part of God's plan for you as his special people, both the needy—those with whom Jesus found solidarity – and the martyrs, all of you who are hurting in the church.***

1. James rejects the Biblical notion that God tests us, that God asks us to endure trials like Abraham with his son, or that Jesus was glad that Lazarus had to die so that "you may believe" (John 11:14).
2. James insists, God gives us only good things,
 - a. God's giving is overly generous – "***perfect*** and lacking in nothing, as we shall all be when we receive the "crown of life."
 - b. And God gives without strings attached.
 - c. "So let no one say when tempted, 'I am tested /tempted by God..'"
 - d. That evil comes only from within you when you give in to your evil and earthly desires—things of wealth.
3. For James, if God is not the source of testing, then God stands with those who are tested, those who suffer because of it.
4. ***If God does not test you, God uses what you are going through to bring you to a positive, joyful outcome.***
 - a. Both you who suffer for your faith in the church,
 - b. and you who are poor and forgotten.
5. So look at yourselves in the mirror, both the poor and church members and say, I am being blessed by God. This too works to God's purpose and God's advantage in making me whole and complete in his sight.
 - a. I heard a motivational tape by Steven Covey who says he gets up every morning and looks in the mirror and says out loud, "God is going to bless me today."
 - b. We should each one of us practice that each morning when we rise and look at ourselves in the mirror.
6. So I think, James would take the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, and he would say, God used that incident to make a complete and perfect follower of Moses. It was not really a test or sacrifice, for "*Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he was called the friend of God.*"
 - a. James utilizes a wonderful description for the church faithful: we are "the friends of God."
 - b. No matter what else we are in this letter by James, we are still God's people and the ones God wants so richly to bless.
7. Our testing or temptation—Isaiah likens it to metal tried in the refining fire and coming out pure--results in our being perfected by God.
 - a. That is his plan from the beginning for those who are God's friends" and live a life of active servanthood.

III. JAMES OUTLINES GOD'S GREAT PLAN FOR US.

- A. ***Like the Jews and Gentile Christians who have been dispersed because of the widespread Roman persecution, you and I in the church are wandering, we have lost our way*** like the begging transients who pass through town. (page 3)

1. We no longer look in the mirror and see clearly what God sees.
2. James is trying to gather us together –all of us in our suffering and bring us together back to the right road.
 - a. The last thing God will accept is moral apathy, or resignation.
3. He calls for endurance, –an unwavering determination.
 - a. in New Testament Greek, **hypōmōné**.
 - b. Often this is rendered as “*steadfastness*” in the Bible, as in YAHWEH’s unwavering, always dependable steadfast love.
 - c. Another word James uses is “whole-hearted,” as opposed to the double-hearted who are tossed on a wave between sin and goodness.
4. We mistranslate that as “patience.” It is a more active, more involved action word, which evidences a real hope, a Christian joy.
 - a. I have told a church member when they bring up the subject of how long it is taking to find a new pastor: “This is a lesson in patience.”
 - b. Now I realize I am saying the wrong thing, I should encourage her as James does, “to embrace the future with active endurance.”
 - c. Do something, become a servant to the poor.
 - d. Do something positive in our church if you think the wait for a new pastor is too long.
 - (1) Make a tithe to the general mission or benevolence of our Presbytery! Deliver Meals on Wheels next week.
 - (2) Volunteer to be on the Mission or Membership Committee.
5. Is it not when you or I have faced the most significant temptation or trial of our life, that our faith has been shaped most definitively?

B. Christian wisdom, as James views it, is to look in the mirror of faith, and see things not through your eyes, but through the eyes of God, and thinking as God thinks, loves and endures.

1. The next time you are tempted to wonder about this church without a new pastor yet, ask yourself instead, “What does God see when God looks at this church?” How may I see my church through God’s eyes?

C. God promises to give us the eyes to see the whole plan, but only when you and I no longer waver or let ourselves to be tossed back and forth, when we are totally single-hearted “friends of God.”

1. The completion of our lives comes with a “crown of life” and glory.
2. The second mention of Jesus Christ by James is as “the Lord of glory” in chapter 2, verse 1.
3. That is ours after we have withstood the test of life, not in this world.
 - a. And this is what James finally calls seeing perfection.
4. I used to raise and show Abyssinian cats, both here in the USA and in Europe for a year. The Abyssinian cat came from Egypt; it is the oldest breed in existence. Cat shows are based on a Standard of Excellence. Judges deduct for imperfections. But we are not like that.
5. Perfection is not something that is ours, not something we can ever achieve; it is a gift from God out of his generosity. It is never ours in
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this life. We were not created perfect; all of us are born so very different, and none of us will die perfect or anywhere near it. Perfection is how God wants to view us in his love, in his kingdom.

a. When I demand someone else or my church be perfect, to change something before I will have anything to do with them, that is the terrible sin of pride or self-righteousness in me.

D. ***Christian tradition says all martyrs who have died receive this precious gift of perfection, the crown of life, the Lord's glory.***

1. The Revelation of John attests to it.

2. Do any of you remember Eliza Hewitt's 112-year-old hymn
*Will there be any stars, any stars in my crown,
When at evening the sun goeth down?
When I wake with the blest in the mansions of rest,
....Oh, what joy it will be when His face I behold...
Should there be any stars in my crown"*

a. Eliza Edmunds Hewitt , after graduating from high school in Philadelphia, became a teacher. Her career was cut short by a serious spinal problem. She recovered partially and turned to hymn-writing. For many years Eliza was the Sunday School superintendent at the Northern Home for Friendless Children.

3. I believe this vision, this looking in the mirror of perfection, as "the friends of God" is a vision you and I need in this congregation, as we endure, as we become more determined and steadfast, more joy-filled in our second year together. (page 5)

May all of God's patient waiting servants now say..."Amen!"