

**Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish,  
Saint Francisville, LA  
9 September 2018**

**James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17**

An 80-year-old couple was worried because they kept forgetting things all the time. The doctor assured them there was nothing seriously wrong except old age, and suggested they carry a notebook and write things down so they wouldn't forget. Several days later, the old man got up to go to the kitchen. His wife said, "Dear, get me a bowl of ice cream while you're up." "Okay," he said. "...and put some chocolate syrup on it and a few cherries, too," she added. "You'd better write all this down." "I won't forget!" he said. Twenty minutes later he came back into the room and handed his wife a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon. She glared at him. "Now, I told you to write it down! I knew you'd forget." "What did I forget?" he asked. She replied, "My toast!"

What does this joke have to do with the Epistle of James? Absolutely nothing. I just liked the joke! Anyway, let us talk about James this morning. The Epistle of James is very Jewish in its style and theology and it doesn't mince with words. In fact, James makes himself quite clear: We as Christians have a moral responsibility to care for the poor. This care for the poor entails feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and respecting the dignity of all without partiality. But this mandate goes even deeper. James asks several important questions today, "How can you really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ and show acts of favoritism?" In other words, "How can you claim a Christian identity and still mistreat the poor?" "How can we ever say we love the Lord when we despise those who are the neediest among us?"

Many show great deference and respect for the wealthy, while showing great disrespect or great apathy to the poor. "Have we become biased judges who show preferential treatment for the powerful and with evil thoughts abuse the poor?" At heart, the society in which the Epistle of James was written was a society obsessed with appearances! Attention to social class was an important part of their world.

Some of the reasons for this obsession with appearances come from history. In Israeli culture, wealth, health, progress, fertility, and peace are blessings the Lord gives to those who are faithful to his Covenants. On the other hand, poverty, illness, infertility and lack of peace are curses against those who are disobedient to the Law and the Covenants. Therefore, most wealthy men are considered "Righteous" or "Holy", whereas most poor and sick people are considered "Sinners", "unclean", and "Cursed by God".

The congregation of James is impressed by those people who have wealth, influence and power, to the point that they offer them the choice seats at their assemblies. In turn, those who are wealthy and powerful have come to expect certain privileges the rest of the people seldom receive. While the wealthy and well dressed are being treated with great care, the poor are not seated, or are made to sit at other people's feet.

At heart, James' concern is one of identity. What should be the distinguishing characteristic of a Christian congregation? For some it is the worship style. We divide churches into "High Church", "Low Church" or "Broad Church." For others it is the theology espoused by the congregation. We divide churches into "Liberal", "Conservative" or "Moderate." For others it is the quality of the programs the church offers, so we divide them into "Evangelistic", "Mission-Driven", "Disciple-making". Lastly, for others, it is the denominational affiliation, so we divide churches into "Roman Catholic", "Orthodox", "Anglican" and "Protestant".

For James there is one primary characteristic that makes a church a Christian congregation: The Love the congregation has for the Lord Jesus, which is manifested in the care the congregation takes of the poor. A Christian congregation is a body of believers that takes care of those in need among them. The primary command for those who love the Lord is to "Love their neighbor as themselves." James is very clear that love of God and Love of neighbor summarize the entire Law.

James asks a poignant question, "Has God not chosen the poor to be heirs of his Kingdom?" In other words, "Has God not chosen a humble teenage woman from Nazareth to be the mother of the Savior? Did Christ not choose a band of humble tradespeople to be his first disciples? Has God not sent his only-begotten Son to die for those people they are failing to include?" The irony here is that the assembly is bending over backwards to please the rich, at about the same time these people were oppressing them, dragging them into court, and ridiculing their faith in Jesus Christ.

Many in James' day are quite proud to have influential friends and to be seen rubbing shoulders with the well-heeled, while at the same time trying hard to avoid certain people they secretly blame for their misfortunes. Now, James makes several statements that have made him very unpopular among Protestants. First James says, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith, but you have no works? Can faith save you?"

In many ways, James is the Rodney Dangerfield of the New Testament. He gets no respect. Rodney used to say, "My psychiatrist told me I was crazy and I said I want a second opinion. He said okay, you're ugly too." James gets no respect from many Protestants who see him advocating a works righteousness. When he asks, "Can faith alone save you?" many Protestants yell in unison, "Yes, It Can!" Then they quickly add,

“Salvation is by faith alone, apart from the works of the Law”. Many of us see in these statements and questions of James an attack on the theology of Paul. In fact, this is one of the reasons why Luther disliked James so much. But we must ask, what is James really saying? Is he implying that salvation depends on our good works? We get ourselves there somehow? It’s all about us? If this is so, “Where is the good news in James?”

I believe Paul and James are talking about two different things. In Galatians 2:16, Paul writes “we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ”. Justification for Paul is a legal term that speaks of our “Eternal Salvation”. According to Jewish thought eternal salvation was only possible if one did the “works of the law.” The Law here refers to the Law of Moses, which means the need for circumcision, purification rituals, and the eating of kosher foods. Paul is saying eternal salvation is a free gift of grace through faith and not dependent on circumcision, cleansing rituals and sacrifices.

What James is talking about, on the other hand, is not works leading to eternal salvation, but rather “works” of caring for the disadvantaged. These works show the world our Christian identity, our love of neighbor: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick. In other words, James is talking about the same teachings Jesus himself demanded of us in Matthew 25:34-40. Paul would agree with James, for Paul wrote: “The only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14). Paul would agree with James that if our faith does not produce fruits, then our faith is dead. We should have a working faith, one that does the will of God for our neighbors. This faith works through love (Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14). Paul would agree with James that if our faith does not produce fruits, then our faith is dead.

A Christian life that honors God must have a balance between the proclamation of our faith, and loving others in a practical way. When we encounter a brother and a sister who is hungry and naked, and we say, “Go in peace, keep warm, and remember Jesus loves you”, and yet we do nothing to help that person we are showing the world that there is a lack of nexus between our life and our faith. In Paul’s words, we show the world that we do not have what really counts, “faith working through love”. But, let me be very clear. As Christians we are called to do good works not because we are earning our salvation. Our salvation is an assured reality, obtained through the blood of Christ on the cross. Of this there can be no doubt! We do good works because we have a faith that is alive! Our good works are the consequence and natural development of our salvation, and not the means by which we achieve our salvation. God in Christ has done it all for us. The penalty has been paid. There is nothing we can add to improve that free gift, or to render ourselves worthy of it. May Christ continue to bless you. Amen!