

*Almighty God, whose loving hand hath given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor thee with our substance, and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of thy bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Good morning!

It's so great to read from the Epistle of St. James this morning. For many years, it was my favorite book of the New Testament; only recently having been surpassed by the letter to the Hebrews. Throughout my time as a preacher and pastor, I have found that folks are generally curious about this particular text, perhaps because it is a bit of a Biblical deep cut; it never gets as much attention as the Gospels or the Letters of Paul. Some folks are even leery of James' letter, as it doesn't have some of the more familiar stories, parables, or doctrines of other parts of the New Testament. Still, the letter provides a certain...clarity of voice as regards the way Christians are to act. It's interesting then, that our reading from James is bookended by both an introduction to how to read and use the Law of Moses and an account of how Jesus understood the heart as both the seat of wickedness, but also most certainly the seat of human goodness in response to God's.

In Deuteronomy this morning we heard, even if kind of indirectly, that the commandments of God, if followed by His people Israel, would increase their wisdom. Of course, the text also guarantees that part of the

benefits of Israel's faithfulness to the commandments is that they will be *recognized* for their wisdom and discernment, which in turn brings honor to the God that gave them. I've said it before, but it bears repeating throughout the Bible, faithfulness to God's commandments is not only considered an important aspect of justice and righteousness, but also wisdom. After all, the wise ones are the ones most likely to have the right brains and hearts to execute justice and righteousness. And that idea, which again we read strongly implied in Deuteronomy, is certainly at the core of how we can read James together over the next few weeks.

When James wrote his letter to "the twelve tribes in dispersion," as he wrote in the address in the beginning of the text, he almost certainly had that text and ones like it in mind. And we think that James was an observant and well-informed Christian Jew writing to other Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah in the earliest years of the Church. Thus, the way we can read this text is kind of like a manual for Christian wisdom, which again is not the same as bare head knowledge, but rather faithfulness to Christ's command for our life and work together, a life that magnifies God and extends the boundaries of Christ's Kingdom. In reading this letter, we could fall into the trap of petty moralism and think that the text that James laid out for us is like a checklist for good behavior. But if it's just a moral punch card, we might end up getting into the same kinds of arguments with Jesus that the Pharisees did in Mark. I think James paid very clear attention to Jesus when Jesus taught that the

orientation of the human heart towards God's truth and goodness is what results in actual holiness, actual wisdom, actual Christian righteousness in action.

So, we who would be wise by our heart's desire to follow Christ, those of us who wait on God's every perfect gift, those of us who have enjoyed the new birth that comes from the word of truth, what can we learn from James today? It's actually shockingly simple. 1) Watch your mouth. and 2) Do what you hear.

Now that might be a little simplistic, but James will return to both these ideas several times in his letter, especially this whole deal about being careful custodians of our tongues. To me, this verse is perhaps one of the most counter cultural verses in the entire New Testament: "let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."

Careful listening is not one of humanity's strongest suits, and quick speech is one of humanity's worst habits. And anger, well, wrath is a deadly weapon as we know. James, I think, wisely attached wrath and anger to unthoughtful listening and speech because he was likely a pretty decent observer of human behavior. How many times have we been offended because we didn't take the time to actually listen? How many times have we offended someone by not being more careful with

our intemperate speech? Or, perhaps more likely in 2021, how many times have we been less than careful in how we treat one another with our words as we see use on the screen in all manner of electronic communication, be it email, social media, and so on? Blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus said. And peacemakers are seldom known for being hostile with their words.

But not only be mindful of your words so as to not deploy unrighteous anger, but also be ready to actually be deployed as a minister of the Word. "But be doers of the word, not just hearers," James encouraged his readers. I think it's really interesting where he took this idea in his teaching. First, there is a sense in which not applying the word of life to one's own life is a matter of self-deception, as if one is fooling oneself by not being a so-called doer of the word. And he even takes that idea further by employing kind of an odd image of someone forgetting themselves after looking into a mirror. Either way, it is as if only hearing the word and not acting on it renders a person somehow incomplete, missing out on the blessing that comes from being actively faithful to Jesus' royal law of love.

And James has no time for folks who have fooled themselves into thinking they've got it all together but haven't bridled their tongues. It might seem harsh to hear that such a person's religion is worthless. But recall that so much of the religion of Jesus is that all that would follow

him would be offerings of righteous sacrificial love for the life of the world, active reconcilers between humanity and God, just like he is. Those with tongue unbridled and deceived into nonaction tend not to be that kind of offering if we're being honest. Rather, the type of religion that really hits the mark is the kind that can have a heart open to care for widows and orphans, this is an undefiled offering, and this is the kind of heart worth asking God for; truly a good and perfect gift sent down from Heaven from the Father of Lights.

But real talk? Even though I get excited when I think about the faith in action that James encourages, I still get that sense that I'll fall into that Pharisee trap where I just go through the motions and hope that it'll be good enough, or that trap where I'm just checking boxes to stay out of cosmic trouble. Or maybe you're reading along and you're just like, "yeah I'm not here and I'll never get there" so you feel discouraged. The beautiful thing for people like us is that we are being drawn together by the Holy Spirit, and even better, the same Spirit is with us to help us get wiser so we can have hearts big enough to follow his commands. Sometimes, when I feel like I'm not hitting the mark, not measuring up holiness wise, I remember that this kind of direction, in James, in other parts of the Bible, is meant to show us what kind of people will be Kingdom workers. And even as I'm not quite where I'd like to be, God can still use me, use us, as He enlightens our minds and subdues our wills to His greater life and intention for us beyond what we can ask or imagine.

So, this week, pray, dig deep, and really concentrate on how you can have solid custody of your tongue and be a doer of the word wherever you find yourself. Take a second before you respond in speech or maybe ask someone else to read that email or Facebook comment before you post. If Christ's word to us is about faithfulness, truth, beauty, love, and God's perfection, it's always a good step to consider how you can bring any of that to bear against your family life, your job, your studies, and so on. And one of the coolest parts of it, as that in so doing you are magnifying the Living God and showing yourself to be wise and full of discernment, showing the peoples around you how close God is to you whenever you call on Him.

To Christ be all Glory; from age to age. Amen.