

First Things First

James 1:17-29?

I think this may be a first for me. Twenty years in the ministry and I've never preached in James before – at least I don't think I have. It seems improbable, given some of the more obscure things I have preached on, but if I have, I surely don't remember it.

And it's not that I've just never gotten around to it. It's been quite intentional. Along with a few others, it's just not one of my favorite books.

I take comfort in knowing that I'm in good company, though. Luther couldn't stand it. Thought it never should have been included in the Bible – “an epistle of straw” is what he called it, I believe. The reason Luther couldn't abide by it was that James is all about works, and Luther was strictly a grace guy. You can't fault him for that, I guess, given the climate of the church in his day. Corruption was its middle name, and one of their worst offenses was taking advantage of the people by telling them all of the things they had to do in order to earn their salvation from God, things like giving money, lots of money, to the Church. Remember that at this point in time most of the people were illiterate, so they couldn't read the Bible for themselves and had to take the word of their priests. When Luther 're-discovered' the book of Romans and its emphasis on the sheer grace of God saving us, not anything we can, should or must do, Luther ran away from anything that smacked of a works righteousness .

My reasons for shying away from it are different, though. It is true that James emphasizes works. As one person put it, he is all about 'creeds and deeds.' And I have no problem with that. You can't say you believe and then do anything you want. We are free from the Law, yes, but not free from any moral and ethical constraints.

Here is my problem with James: he is too specific. He crosses the line from generalized, generic exhortation to good, moral and compassionate living, and he gets personal. It isn't enough for him to tell us to behave ourselves the way we know Jesus would want us to behave. Merely asking ourselves 'what would Jesus do' in any given situation leaves the barn door too wide open for James. He tells us, under no uncertain terms, what we should and shouldn't be doing if we are going to go around the world calling ourselves Christians. He names names: money. Anger. The language we use. The way we talk about people, ambition, envy. The way we treat people who are what society would consider “beneath us.” The very sorts of things that preachers dread preaching on because it tends to make people unhappy with us. It's fine to preach about money, as long as it isn't your money we are talking about, right? It's fine to talk about wantonness and carousing and perversion and all of those things Paul talks about, because, frankly, most of us aren't guilty of them. But things like anger and ambition and envy – you know, those petty sins – they're too close to home. They are too personal. For you, and for me. I don't like it any better than you do.

Paul's letters seem to be written to Christians living in dens of iniquity so he talks about all sorts of wild and sordid behaviors, but James is talking to people in Kansas and North Dakota and East Tennessee, regular people who, for the most part, live regular, upstanding lives. And he makes us take a long, hard look at ourselves and the things that we excuse by telling ourselves

that we aren't like those other people, living loose, immoral lives, and we aren't like that horrible guy in California who kidnapped an 11 year old girl and held her prisoner for 18 years, fathering two children with her. We're just good, hardworking people, trying to do our best. James will beg us to think otherwise.

But he won't be completely merciless. For today, he's going to cut us some slack. He's not going to talk about money. Not yet, anyway. And he's not going to bring up the all the trouble and heartache our wagging and critical tongues cause, not today. That will come later. For now it's first things first.

I've come to realize, a lot slower than most people do probably, that you can't just tell people to give more generously than they do, or chastise them for gossiping and expect them to respond favorably. They will not make the changes in their lives that you have called for. They will not appreciate you for your efforts, even if you tell yourself and them that you are doing it for their own good, or because it's what Jesus said we should do. There is a right way and a wrong way to do it. People need the proper motivation to do things differently – to use their money differently or to change their attitude towards others, or their own behavior. Telling someone to do it because I said so, or even because God said so, just doesn't work.

Not even God expects you to jump, or give, or bridle your tongue, or honor your father and mother, or be compassionate, just because he said so. There is always a preface to the rules, the laws, the do's and the don't's. The 10 commandments begins with, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." And James begins with, "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." Before God goes and tells you what to do and what not to do, God tells you who he is, and who you are. In other words, ethics come from a sense of identity.

Here's what I mean by that. Take that passage in Deuteronomy, the beginning of the 10 commandments. God doesn't just get them out of Egypt and lay down the ground rules. He introduces himself. Hi, I'm God. I'm the one who heard you when you cried about how terrible life was there. I'm the one who rescued you from slavery, and now I'm going to give you a land of your very own. A land that's at least as good as Egypt, maybe even better.

You can see what he's done. In just a few short phrases he's told them that he is a good and gracious and kind and powerful God who has saved them from their enemy; from a life of hardship. In just a few short phrases he has created in them a sense of who they are, of how important they are to God, and hopefully, how grateful they should be. Their compliance in following the commandments that God is about to give them shouldn't come out of compulsion or any arbitrary sense of obedience but out of an understanding of what God has done for them.

James begins his letter and those verses we just read in the same way. He tells them who God is, and he tells them who they are. And the primary way he introduces God is as a giver of gifts. Good gifts. Every good gift comes from God. And then, as if to clarify exactly what he means by that, he says, *life* comes from God. Not just life – the sun, the birds, beautiful flowers and fresh summer corn and each breath we take; not just our families and our friends and the ability

to laugh and sing and bike the Creeper Trail and look down the Grand Canyon – but this new life. This new freedom that we have from shame and guilt and failure. This freedom from having to try so hard to be perfect in order to be loved.

Before James ever holds our feet to the fire and tells us to watch our mouths or our pocketbooks or the way we treat people, he asks us to look in the mirror. What do we see? Now, if you answer wrinkles, or a big nose or blue eyes, or zits, that's really not the answer he's looking for. What he wants you to see when you look in the mirror is someone who is loved. Someone who has been given gifts. Good gifts. Very good gifts. James will get in our faces next week, but for now, all he wants of us is to look in the mirror and take stock of our lives. This week the news has focused on what we have lost: the losses of Katrina four years ago, Ted Kennedy, 18 years of a young girl's life. But how much time do we spend focusing on what we have? What we have been given? God heard the cries of the Hebrew people and saved them from the Egyptians. Gave them a place to call home. What has God done for you? How has God saved you, and loved you, and given you a place of rest and peace?

The answer that you come up with is the basis for how you will hear everything else that James will say to us. If we don't ever think about who we are and what God has done for us, all these rules and obligations will never sound like anything but that, and all of James' talk about good deeds and polite talk will just sound oppressive and barbed. But if you take a good look at yourself and your life and at God's open hand, chances are you will be filled with gratitude and wonder and generosity. Love. And none of this will feel like heavy burdens; should's heaped upon ought's; sharp jabs. In fact, you will probably see that they aren't rules and laws and obligations at all. They are nothing more than love enacted. Loving others they way God loves you.

James tells us to be doers of the Word, not just hearers. But we do have to be hearers first. Hearers and believers. Have you heard and believed the Word? God loves you. Did you hear it after the prayer of confession? You have been forgiven. God has given you great, good gifts, the gift of life. Next week James will start to get tough on us, asking us how well we are doing at being doers of the Word, but this week he simply asks us to take stock of our lives. Look in the mirror. What do you see?