

Scripture Reading for September 5 2021.

Mark 7:14-23 (NIV)

¹⁴ Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

¹⁷ After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. ¹⁸ “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? ¹⁹ For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

²⁰ He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. ²¹ For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.

James 1:17-27 (NIV)

¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. ²¹ Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

²⁶ Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Sermon: Character Matters!

Labour Day weekend marks a transition to a new beginning for many people, especially for students and educators, and it also reminds us that the summer is essentially over and it's time to go back to work. What does a minister say at a time like this? Perhaps some are in the mood for an encouraging and inspirational speech; others might like to be reminded once more of wise advice as we start a new "term." As it happens, the lectionary begins a short study of the book of James, and it's full of practical exhortations to inspire the church in its ongoing task. Consequently, today we will begin a short series from this remarkable and sometimes overlooked book.

Let's start with a brief introduction. Traditionally, this letter is thought to have been written by James, the brother of Jesus,¹ who later became the head of the early church in Jerusalem.² However, the Greek wording and style is of a very high quality and so some have rightly questioned whether a likely carpenter would be so well educated.³ James was martyred in AD 62, and it is quite possible that this letter was written by one of his disciples to honor his memory, preserve his legacy along with the oral tradition. As we will see, the content of this Christian letter is distinctly Jewish;⁴ it's not unlike the book of Proverbs with its wise sayings and advice.⁵ Consequently, Martin Luther didn't like this letter, calling it an "epistle of straw" because he thought it didn't emphasize God's *grace* sufficiently enough.⁶ However, as we shall see, James alludes Jesus' sayings from the Sermon on the Mount.⁷ So we must be careful not simply dismiss the book of James because it was too Jewish for Luther's tastes. Instead, we need consider Paul's letters alongside all the other New Testament documents - including James - and explore and embrace both their similarities and differences.

¹ Mark 6:3; Matt 13:55-56; Gal 1:19; John 2:12. There has been discussion as to whether Mary was his actual mother - could it be Joseph's son from an earlier marriage? - but these debates are often driven by ascetic tendencies in the Catholic Church. There were other brothers and sisters too. (See also Mark 16:1; Matt 27:56; Luke 24:10.)

² See Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal 1:19; 2:9.

³ It is not unreasonable to suggest James had a secretary, or that it was translated/constructed from Aramaic after James' martyrdom (AD 62) by a faithful disciple.

⁴ Containing references to the widely-used Greek LXX translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. It was written for the Jewish Christians dispersed throughout the Roman Empire, mainly in Syria and Turkey, to encourage them to live in a (Christian) way that would appeal to devout Jews.

⁵ The structure of James is somewhat difficult to follow and, in many respects, seems like a collection of sayings. As a collection of moral exhortation, James can be compared to other writings whose concern is the *practical* wisdom of right *behaviour*. In this sense it resembles the popular moral philosophy of the Greco-Roman world in its insistence on the control of passions and of speech. James also has a distinctive Jewish style to it, referencing the Torah, and has (contra Paul) a positive view of the Mosaic Law – *not* as a set of ritual obligations (like circumcision), but as a moral commandment and call. James also appropriates the voice of the prophets and his understanding of human life as fundamentally covenantal and relational. In many ways James is considered as an extension of Jewish Wisdom Literature and therefore can be compared with the book of Proverbs and other writings in the late inter-Testamental (or 2nd Temple) period.

⁶ This Protestant bias is based on the primacy of *Paul's* writings in shaping its theology; cf. Jas 2:24 and Gal 2:16 (NET). That's dangerous! It's most likely that James was written after Galatians and Romans (at least) and so are informed by Paul's work.

⁷ (. . .and elsewhere in the gospels.) Was this because the author was aware of Matthew's gospel (written c. 80-90 AD) or because he was familiar with the oral tradition on which Matthew was based?

James begins by reminding his readers that *God* is the source of *wisdom*,⁸ and that God is generous in giving it to those who humbly ask. (Students and teachers take special note!) In light of that fact, James later calls for human *understanding* or an appreciation of what he is about to say.⁹ James totally gets it that life is hard, and he wants his readers to endure, to persist in their hardships.¹⁰ He also makes it very clear that God is *not* the source of our trials.¹¹ That is worth repeating! God does *not* send us troubles just to see if we will trip up. God does not “tempt” us.¹² God did not cause COVID or cancer or any other means of suffering.¹³ God is Love!¹⁴ I often hear people say that the life circumstances and struggles they are facing have been deliberately “sent” by God. This makes me annoyed inside and wonder what kind of mean and nasty “God” they believe in! In [classical] theological language, they likely believe in an all-powerful God who *knows* the future because God has *planned* it that way. They therefore say that their suffering is part of God’s “will,” and hence God’s “desire” for them. Now I can understand why some people think that way, there are many Old Testament stories that suggest that is how God works.¹⁵ Understanding the ways God acts in the world is something that God’s people have tried to fathom and systematize for millennia. The gospel writers, for example, saw things differently from the Old Testament writers.¹⁶ And James who is traditionally one of the most conservative or Jewish-minded of Christians,¹⁷ clearly understands God *not* to be the source of our trials. The temptations we face arise from human desires, says James,¹⁸ and we are encouraged to *choose* to do good rather than evil.¹⁹ Of course, internal temptations are only one aspect of our trials, external stressors and sources of suffering are another important element. James doesn’t really address them explicitly. Instead, he reminds us that: “All generous giving and every perfect gift originate in God, the Father of Lights, whose ‘light’ does not change.”²⁰ In other words, God’s *character* does not change; God’s constancy is for *good*. Character really matters! I therefore encourage us to reflect on the nature of the God we believe in, for if our understanding of God’s character is flawed or distorted then we can have a warped view of reality, and that can lead to an unhealthy or a jaundiced view of the life of faith.

As we move on, it is worth reminding ourselves that we have a tendency to want to *blame* something or someone else for our troubles. If you go back to the Adam and Eve story, she blamed the serpent

⁸ Jas 1:5.

⁹ Jas 1:19.

¹⁰ Jas 1:2, 12

¹¹ Jas 1:13.

¹² James considers temptation is *human* in origin – it is our desires.

¹³ Neither do I believe God “permits” or “allows” our trials, i.e., has the *capability* to intervene and *chooses* not to.

¹⁴ See 1 John 4:8, 16. This is our starting point for a theological understanding of the *character* of God.

¹⁵ Consider God’s apparent testing of Abraham (in sacrificing Isaac, Gen 22:1-19) and the story of Job (Job 1-2).

¹⁶ For example, Satan’s role is evident in the New Testament, but absent in the pre-exilic Scriptures.

¹⁷ Traditionally, James is thought to have held a Nazarite vow (Num 6:1-8) - like John the Baptist - never cutting his hair, etc.

¹⁸ Jas 1:14-5.

¹⁹ See also wisdom writer Sirach’s words in Sir 15:14-15. James’ perspective is a very different view from Paul’s understanding of sin as a transcendent power that has been overcome by God’s act in the cross of Jesus, the resurrection, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. James is not confronting Paul’s perspective here, but he does present a more optimistic view of human potential and the ability to live in God’s ways. However, this arises *not* from human effort but as a result of being born by the gospel, the word of truth; Jas 1: 18. (cf. work of the Holy Spirit.)

²⁰ Jas 1:17. The “Father of Lights” has Greco-Roman (astronomical) overtones, whose “light” does not alter.

and Adam blamed his wife - whom God's provided.²¹ In the same way, *we* often want to blame God, or something or someone else, for the trials we face. If recognizing that God's character is fundamentally one of *goodness* is the first take-home message for today, the second is to *take responsibility for our actions*. James says, "Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters! Let every person be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger."²² It's a wise proverb that introduces his next series of exhortations; not only does God's character matter, *our* character matters too. "Think before you speak," says James, "For *human* anger does not accomplish *God's* righteousness."²³ He reminds his audience that God, through the truthful gospel message, has graciously given us new birth and – adapting that metaphor – we are therefore to be fruitful.²⁴ James then says: "But be sure you live out the message and do not merely listen to it and so deceive yourselves."²⁵ That self-deception is reflected in his subsequent witty parable: "For if someone merely listens to the message and does not live it out, he is like someone who gazes at his own face in a mirror. For he gazes at himself and then goes out and immediately forgets what sort of person he was."²⁶ Now, you have heard the saying, "practice what you preach," which is certainly a vital imperative for ministers – and politicians! James broadens it by saying, "put into practice what you have *heard*." In saying this, he is simply repeating the words of many ancient moralists. Moreover, all teachers want that for their students; that's one reason they assign homework! Doctors also desire it for their patients; we can be given the appropriate medication, but will we be compliant and take it? Therapists and counselors also want that for their clients. We can hear all the right advice, we can appreciate that it's wise and relevant, but will we actually put it into practice? If we don't do those kinds of things, we are wasting everyone's time and making no progress. James says the same thing about the life of faith: "If any think they are religious and do not control their tongues, they are deceiving themselves and their religious practice – or their true "worship" – is empty and worthless."²⁷ For James, faith is demonstrated by *practical* action, beginning with taking responsibility for what we *say*.²⁸ James then reminds his readers that for our devotion to be truly authentic in God's eyes, it has to "care for orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep ourselves unstained by the world."²⁹

This has two practical aspects: first, it is *externally* active by looking after those who are vulnerable in society and who fall outside of whatever welfare systems that presently exist. In those days, "widows

²¹ See Gen 3:12-13. (On God's provision of Eve, see Gen 2:18.)

²² Jas 1:19. (See also Matt 5:22; 36; 12:32-37.)

²³ Jas 1:20.

²⁴ Jas 1:18, 21. James makes the "words of truth" in 1:18 synonymous with "the perfect law (Torah), the law of liberty" in 1:25 (see also [5]). James (contra Paul) connection of the perfect law (Torah) to liberty or freedom sounds like a contradiction in terms! Everyone is worried about their personal freedoms and civil liberties. Nevertheless, everyone also recognizes that obeying traffic lights is the responsible way to ensure people's safety and freedoms! Alas, would that be true of COVID vaccines too.

²⁵ Jas 1:22. (cf. Paul in Phil 4:9.) And consider the learn from doing adage: "see one, do one, teach one."

²⁶ Jas 1:23-24 (NET). (The reference this image of self-improvement; see also 1 Cor 13:12.)

²⁷ Jas 1:26.

²⁸ This is evidently a key theme for James, as he expands on it in Jas 3:1-12.

²⁹ Jas 1:27. See also Mic 6:6-8; Matt 9:13; 23:23; Mark 12:33; Luke 11:42. As I mentioned a few weeks ago: ethics matter! See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Ethics-Matter.pdf> .

and orphans” had no one to formally care for them, which is why Jesus’ attentiveness to the needs of widows is often mentioned in the gospels.³⁰ We can expand that care to all those who are vulnerable and not protected by the law - and the gap between the letter or the spirit of the law and the practical reality can be very wide. As people of faith, who believe all are made in the image of God and are worthy of love and grace, we are to fill that gap in whatever ways we can. The second practical element is to remember that in engaging an ethically complicated and messy world, we are *not* to be comprised by it.³¹ We will be talking more about what that means in coming weeks. In short, social justice matters, *and* personal character matters!

Jesus, in our earlier gospel reading, says similar things to James but in the context of the eating of kosher and non-kosher foods: Jesus says, “*Listen* to me . . . and *understand* this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going *into* them. Rather, it is what comes *out of* a person that defiles them.”³² That word “defile” is very strong and super-religious. The Jewish practice of eating Kosher food was understood to be setting them apart from other nations and a sign of their holiness. Jesus totally unravels that practice by saying that what comes *out of* a person is a sign of their character and reveals their moral compass.³³ And what comes out of someone’s heart begins with their speech, demeanor, and actions. In these times, what comes out of hearts is not just revealed by our spoken words but by what we say on social media, along with our “likes” and “shares.” It will come as no surprise to you that I am a social media dinosaur, though I do have a Facebook page. (Don’t expect to find me on SnapChat or TikTok any time soon! Nevertheless, I do have kids . . .) As you all know - and as I know even from email – it’s too easy to write something in haste and hit “send” or “post” and then its “out there” for all to see.³⁴ Forever! (And they can “re-post” it too!) Our frustration and anger can overflow into our texts and on-line posts, and if you look at someone’s feed carefully, you can find some pretty disgruntled people out there, and you wonder why you “friended” them. What comes out of our hearts is revealed by what we say. When we are riled up, my advice [from my mistakes] is to *sleep on it* before you post your thoughts or hit the “like” or “share” button. Be authentic! And let’s ask ourselves: “Does our social media persona [or avatar] truly reflect our character?” If not, what does that really say about *us*?

James’ message also reflects a wisdom saying of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: “Everyone then who *hears these words of mine and acts on them* will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does *not* act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds

³⁰ See also Acts 6:1; 4:32-35; 2:42-47.

³¹ The first (in Jas 1:27), then, is *externalized*, the second, *internalized*. James expands on the that compromise in 2:1-13.

³² Mark 7:14. See also Acts 10:9-16 (and beyond); 15:1-35; Rom 14:14.

³³ Mark 7:17-23; Matt 15:20. In so doing, Jesus is authoritatively and shockingly undoing a key Jewish distinctive.

³⁴ Moreover, humor can be lost in a post or email – it will likely not be read in the way you intended.

blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”³⁵ Hearing and doing matters, says Jesus and James. The Christian life is not all divine grace and then we’re free do whatever we like!³⁶

In conclusion, character matters! Let’s therefore be wise and not foolish as we move forward into a new “term,” so to speak. Let’s *not just listen* to wise words but put them into practice in whatever way that fits our situations. Let’s also take responsibility for what circumstances and actions we can control, beginning with our speech and moving on to other practical matters. And let’s reflect upon our foundational assumptions concerning God’s character, because if we are standing on solid rock, Jesus says will endure through the inevitable storms of life. And finally, as James states at the beginning: “Every good and perfect gift is from God, the Father of Lights,”³⁷ let us therefore “praise God from whom all blessings flow” and live our lives accordingly. Amen.

³⁵ Matt 7:24-27 (see also Luke 6:46-49); this follows on from Jesus’ teaching on self-deception in Matt 7:21-23. See also Luke 11:28; 12:43; John 13:17.

³⁶ We have to navigate carefully between “grace and works” – both are vital! See also [29].

³⁷ Jas 1:17.