

September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024

## James 1:12-27 “Living Gratefully”

We are starting a new series this week that will take us through the Book of James. But there’s something you need to know about this book. The Book of James gets no love. Preachers don’t typically move mountains to find opportunities to preach from James. Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, did not like this book. He called it a “book of straw.” He wished it had never been canonized. The chief reason he doesn’t like it is that it seems to contradict the teachings of Paul. As tempting as it is for me to say, “Yeah, but is that a bad thing?” I’ve got to at least let you know why Martin Luther thinks that’s a bad thing. He says that in the Book of Galatians, Paul wrote, “a person is not justified by the works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.” That’s in Galatians 2:16. I fact checked it. It’s legit. But in James 2:24 the author writes, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” I fact checked that one too, and yes that is also legit. There’s a lot of hand-wringing that goes on in some Christian circles when you run into scriptures that seem to contradict one another. We get so tied up in knots when this happens because we think that the whole of Christianity will collapse at the mere suggestion that there’s any contradictions in scripture. With out going into detail, the logic here can be boiled to, “If there are any contradictions, that makes God a liar!” Some church leaders get all up in arms and say, “Things have got to agree 100% at all times throughout the whole Bible because otherwise people who don’t believe will never believe, and people who do believe might abandon their belief!” Yeah, but why? Again – “It makes God a liar.” Meanwhile, our Jewish sisters and brothers are over here saying, “Oh yeah, there’s tons of contradictions in the scripture! It doesn’t hurt or diminish our faith at all. In fact, it makes us dig into the scriptures even more! It gives us something to discuss because that’s what makes studying the scriptures exciting! And nine times out of ten it makes our faith even stronger!”

I like James because it's about the closest thing we've got to designated wisdom literature in the New Testament. It's not your traditional Jewish wisdom literature like the Book of Proverbs, nor is it renegade Jewish wisdom like the Book of Ecclesiastes. It's kind of like a fusion restaurant – It's a little bit of Greco-Roman “control your passions and refrain from arrogance,” mixed with a little bit of Hebrew, “Love your neighbor and read your Torah.” It's not about maintaining status or achieving worldly success. It's more about maintaining good moral attitudes and actions. It focuses on the community instead of the family structure, and in community all of your actions are done for the sake of everybody. I think we're going to have fun with this. If not, let me know in four weeks.

One of the biggest criticisms of the church is that we are obsessed with do's, don'ts, and thou shalt nots. At least that's the perception. Granted, there are some preachers who love to wag their fingers and list all of the things you shouldn't do because guilt goes a long way. If that's what motivates you, hey, I'm not going to judge. I just don't like it when people dismiss the Christian faith altogether because they think it's nothing but “don'ts” and “thou shalt nots.”

This passage starts with a declaration that God does not tempt us because temptation is evil, and God is good. Everyone is tempted. But if we give in to our own temptations and desires, that's called sin. And sin leads to death. But God brings gifts too. God's generous gifts are good and eternal. God doesn't give us bad gifts like temptation, sin, and death. These things are the result of our own self-centeredness and sin. God is eternally good. Good gifts come from God. Whereas sin gives birth to death, God gives birth to truth and the Word. And to have this understanding means we bear good fruit.

What does it mean to bear good fruit? If it seems like I talk a lot about “fruit,” especially as it relates to good and evil. That's because I was given a formula by my youth minister, Greg Johnson. When I'd ask, “how do I know whether something is good, bad, right or wrong? He

said, “test the fruits.” Everything that is planted bears fruit and it’s either good or bad. If the fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control then it’s good and right. If the fruit is anger, jealousy, lust, division, idolatry, and strife then it’s bad and wrong. He used to say that we’re all like computers. What we put into our operating system determines what comes out. If you put garbage in, garbage is what comes out. However, if you put good things in, you’ll get good output. If everything you put into your computer is outrage, grievance, dissatisfaction, combativeness, disparagement and impurity that’s all that’s going to come out. You think rage-filled people who are constantly putting other people down got that way by listening to inspirational music and watching “Ted Lasso” or “Love on the Spectrum?” I seriously doubt it.

This is the message that James is trying to get across to the church he’s writing to. He’s trying to get people to address the question, “What is the *evidence* that you have received God’s gift of faith and wisdom?” In other words, how do you bear good fruits? The first principle he lays down in verse 19 is “**words matter.**” This will be a major reoccurring theme in James. Here he tells his readers to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Sounds like excellent advice, especially during this season when too many are quick to speak and quick to anger. I would even go as far as to say that outrage is fashionable these days. But honestly, it’s nothing new. Outrage and anger have always been out there on the margins. Some people just seem to live on “outrage energy.”

When I managed a camp in Virginia, we had a guy come on board as the director of our Music Art and Drama camp. And from day one it was abundantly clear that he liked the drama part most. It didn’t take long for us to guess that he was going to be a handful, so our staff switched over to an “alert status” that we reserved for the most difficult camp directors. One day this director came into my office as I was getting ready to have a staff meeting. He asked me if we had a certain kind of microphone that he could use for the music interest group. I told him that all microphones were stored in a cabinet mounted on the backstage left wall. I didn’t say

we had the mic he was looking for because I didn't know! Things disappear at camp when you have 500 campers running through the program over the summer. I just told him where all the mics were. Later, as we were wrapping up our staff meeting, he came storming into the office. And he was red-faced angry and told me that the microphones in that cabinet weren't the kind he was looking for and that it was "appalling" that I would lead him to believe that we had something that we didn't. I counted to five in my head and said, "Appalling is a word that I reserve for war crimes and human trafficking. I think the word you're looking for is 'disappointing.'" Then there was this uncomfortable silence where we just kind of stared at each other. His features began to soften ever so slightly. It looked like he might back down, maybe even apologize. But then Cody, one of my maintenance guys started snickering. Needless to say, that didn't help matters at all. They found a new director for the following year. One that was not fueled by outrage energy.

That was twenty years ago. It seems like these days, there are a lot more disgruntled, grumpy people who operate on outrage and who use hyperbole to describe what they're feeling rather than taking the time to choose their words more carefully. Again, **words matter**. Why are so many people motivated by anger? And why does that anger seem to spread so quickly? James writes that anger does not produce righteousness, therefore we need to rid ourselves of, "sordidness and rank growth of wickedness" so that we can welcome the "implanted word that has the power to save our souls." There it is again – **words matter**. Our words matter! And the word of God that is embedded within us matters. We are all created in the image of God, and the biggest evidence of this is the implanted word. So then what can we do to listen to and nurture God's implanted word within us and others? What does it mean to rid ourselves of the "rank growth of wickedness?" Can we move beyond being swept up by sin and examine our own self-absorption, self-obsession and self-righteous outrage?

James says, “Heck yeah we can!” We nurture that implanted word by being doers of the word. It doesn’t have to be a metaphysical or spiritual action, we can and must embody it and live it. To hear the word and not do the word is to forget who and what you are. You forget the image of God within you. The word is within you waiting to come out in the form of love, mercy, and grace. Knowing who you truly are frees you to act out of that essential nature of being God’s beloved child. Being able to see yourself as a child of God evokes a spirit of gratitude and abundant love which grows and expands beyond ourselves to our neighbor.

Well good grief, pastor, you could just say, “being grateful helps you not be a jerk!” Okay. “Living a grateful life helps you to not be a jerk.” Thank you James. Message received. End of sermon? Almost. I’ve got to address these last few verses in our passage today about “being religious.” You’ve probably heard me say that there’s a difference between being religious and being faithful or even spiritual. My regional minister knows that there are a lot of pastors out there who aren’t crazy about the word “religion,” but she often reminds us that we in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are a religious organization which means we practice religion. I think where we get hung up on this word is when it comes to distinguishing good religion from bad religion. Unfortunately, good religion isn’t very exciting, and it doesn’t get a lot of news coverage. Bad religion, on the other hand, gets a lot of press. You don’t see many leading stories on the news about how a road construction project makes life easier and safer for drivers. But boy are they quick to point cameras at a train wreck or a collapsed bridge or a plane crash. It’s kind of like that with religion too. When we’re out there living out the gospel nobody seems to care. But when one of us messes up and says or does something foolish – we are all over the headlines. But here we are back on this theme of, “words matter.” What we say matters and more importantly what we do matters. James writes,

“If any think they are religious, and do not *bridle their tongues* but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for

orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Pure undefiled religion involves *doing* the word. In the case of the church this letter was addressed to, that meant caring for those who were distressed and in need. They, as a people of God, became a blessing to others through their willingness to obey God regardless of the sacrifice or the cost. Just like Jesus did. Jesus became a blessing so that we, by living an active and open faith, can become a blessing to others too. Go be that blessing, and remember: **Words Matter.**