

**Series Title: “Epistles Offer Practical Guidance”**

**6 September 2015: 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011

“You Do Well If . . .”—Preaching Text: James 2:1-10, 14-17

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“Science without religion is lame;

religion without science is blind” (Albert Einstein).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

1 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7 Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

8 You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 9 But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead (James 2:1-10, 14-17).

As most good Lutherans know their namesake Martin Luther did not have much zeal for the Epistle of James. In fact Luther writes:

In a word St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it (M. Luther).

Most theologians consider Luther’s “dispute” with James concerned doctrine. Luther allegedly thought James uninspiring in its gospel portrayal. He believed that with little effort James’ readers might use it to advance dogmas of works-righteousness. While perhaps true enough,

there may be something else that irked Luther with respect to this “epistle of straw” as he called it. We know that there are differing ways to say similar things. For example a person might say something about “business as usual” while another person might suggest that phrase means “the same old thing.” same idea—different words. What I want to suggest is that James’ emphasis may have not suited Luther as obvious or explicit enough. We find an example of an offending verse just beyond our morning text at James 2:24: “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” Rather than an “either/or” claim that Luther habitually favors, James writes about justification in “both/and” terminology.

Let’s look a little closer at the concerns of today’s text as we will be speaking of James’ epistle for the entire month of September 2015. Here is the \$64,000 question: “Why is being partial a sin?” Each day people ask us to choose from among particulars whether it be friends, paper or plastic, Asian or Hispanic food, country or classic music and the like. Partiality is a privilege of making choices. Yet James has a deeper concern than our mere superficial proclivities for this or that. For while showing partiality is inevitable in human affairs, James has a more serious worry. Class divisions that the baptized fashion among themselves in the faith community trouble James. In other words, James as probably a Jewish Christian repeats in different words what Deuteronomy 1:17 teaches:

You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is Gods. Any case that is too hard for you, bring to me, and I will hear it (Deuteronomy 1:17).

James throws down a challenge—you have also heard it elsewhere I would guess: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Is this possible? It is certainly tricky. James obviously calls the faith community to a higher standard—*agapē* or God-like love. A love like this creates a radical call to comprehensive justice. That is we act with equity toward all person regardless of circumstance—especially economic circumstance.

In an ideal world of Christian faith envisioned by James, this Christ-like love wins over partiality. But in the real world of daily life, partiality appears to trump agape love. James calls all believers, rich and poor, to reject partiality. Our solidarity comes from our common bond of treating others fairly and equally—all in Christ.

I am partial to reading Luke's flair for the apt story. He makes a similar point as does James when the evangelist tells a story about equity. It goes like this:

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely . . . .

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

12 He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:1, 7-14).

A mentor, Dr. Fred Craddock who died earlier this year, helped me see that the way we say something can help carry its freighted meaning. Do you remember the story in song from Lerner and Loewe' Camelot? Imagine Robert Goulet singing this:

If ever I would leave you  
It wouldn't be in summer.  
Seeing you in summer I never would go.  
Your hair streaked with sun-light,  
Your lips red as flame,  
Your face with a lustre  
that puts gold to shame!

But if I'd ever leave you,  
It couldn't be in autumn.  
How I'd leave in autumn I never will know.  
I've seen how you sparkle  
When fall nips the air.  
I know you in autumn  
And I must be there.

And could I leave you  
running merrily through the snow?  
Or on a wintry evening  
when you catch the fire's glow?

If ever I would leave you,  
How could it be in spring-time?  
Knowing how in spring I'm bewitched by you so?  
Oh, no! not in spring-time!  
Summer, winter or fall!  
No, never could I leave you at all!

Of course, he could have just stated the obvious: "I'm not leaving!"

Luke writes like the first example and perhaps we could say James like the second. Either way they both mean that for Christians we are to treat each other with justice and equity—because we are siblings in Christ. If we do so, then "we will do well." Amen.

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