

Grace and Faith Put into Action 2021
James 1:17-27 1 Peter 1:23-2:5, 9

James 1:17-27 (New Revised Standard Version)

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. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on-going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. 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.

1 Peter 1:23-2:5, 9 (New Revised Standard Version)

You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. For "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever." That word is the good news that was announced to you. Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

I remember clearly the first time I read through the book of James.

I was a very young and idealistic teenager,
just back from a wonderful youth group retreat.

I'd returned home freshly inspired and with my faith on-fire.

I really wanted to grow deeper and closer to God.

I liked what I read in James as it connected and grabbed hold of me,
finally something in the Bible that was clear, sensible & practical.

It made perfect sense to me, something concrete to do,
and so from now on, that was how I intended to live my life ...

...with those specific instructions **and a little will-power on my part,**

I would be well on my way toward faithful Christian discipleship,
what could possibly go wrong?

More than a few decades later, honestly,

I am a little less enthusiastic about James these days,
and not that it isn't truthful and God word for us,
and still very sensible, clear and extremely pragmatic.
No, the problem is that even on my best and most faithful day,
I still fall far short of the life-standards it describes.

There always seems to be a gap, or sometimes even a wide chasm
between God's truth that I know, and the righteousness that
I am actually able to live and manage with any consistency.

As Paul wrote, (Romans 7:15, 19 & 24)

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.
For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Wretched man that I am! Who
will rescue me from this body of death?

Fortunately, it's by grace alone and faith alone that we are saved.

God's call is not for us to be perfect or get it all right every time,
but it is for us to be authentic and focused on Christ Jesus,
to reflect the grace & blessings we ourselves have received,
and for our lives, **for our words, deeds and attitudes** to declare,
the promise of God's grace and hope that heals our broken lives.

The book of James is not about how to receive God's grace & salvation,
but was addressed to people who are already Christians
and who already knew the stories and teachings of Jesus.

**It's about how to live out the faith that they already have,
and how to live up to the very best God created us to be.**

So I read James as the ideal, the target of faithful Christian living.

It is the high standard and goal for which we strive to attain,
and by which we can measure our spiritual progress thus far.

And in fact, as James explains, when we do get it right,
it's really a gift from above, it's God working through us, vs. 17-18

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. In fulfillment of his own
purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his
creatures.

During September, the next 4 weeks we will be working through James,
and the passage today introduces themes to be developed further.

vs. 19-20

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to
anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

vs. 22

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

vs. 27

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.

James wants us to understand that there is a critical connection
between our faith, **and what we do** with it because of it,
between our spirituality **and what we do**
to help others in need, others we could assist.

Remember, I am your God who loves you, heals and redeems you,
so let the world know of my love, my purpose and blessings
through the love and compassion that you live
by demonstrating my grace toward your neighbor...

... which is exactly as Jesus describes and commands,
on the night of the Last Supper, as recorded in John 13:34-35
"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you
also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for
one another."

Now James is not suggesting that we can do this on our own strength,
but that we strive to act & behave based on what we truly believe,
because our religion & our treatment of others **are inseparable.**

We can no more live into God's blessings and not reflect God's grace,
then we could squeeze a fistful of jelly,
and not have some of it squirt out through our fingers.

Because we have freely received from God both grace and blessings,
we know and can trust that we are loved and sustained by our God,
and if we allow it, it will seep into other areas of our lives.

**That is our spiritual challenge into which we're called to grow & live
because that is who we are & are becoming, by God's grace & promise.**

Do you remember where you were, what you were doing, Jan. 29, 1986?,
that terrible day when the Challenger space shuttle blew up,
and some very remarkable and brave people lost their lives?

I followed the inquiry hearings that followed the disaster closely.
I recall being stunned by the engineers' and managers' testimony,
of such intelligent, well-educated and highly skilled people,
who **so disastrously failed to live up to their credentials.**

We know that the people making decisions were a lot smarter than that,
and were trained far better than to let that spacecraft go up
under such dangerous and unsafe and deadly conditions.

They simply did not live up to who they were.

My point is not to get carried away with the finger pointing,
since there are countless instances in my own life
where I too have not lived up to who I am either.
It is so easy to get a little careless, complacent and distracted

and a little bit sloppy in how we live out our Christian lives.

**We struggle against being enticed and distracted from God's will,
of being seduced by the things, desires & values of this world...
... and it's not such a long trip for me to fall back into my old self,
to live as if I were not a beloved and redeemed child of God,
and slide back into this world's defective ways of living.**

1st Peter addresses that concern and danger with a reminder
of the blessings we have, what we are freely given through Christ,
and God's promises already in process of being fulfilled ... vs. 23

You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living
and enduring word of God.

The tragic disaster of the Challenger
happened because good people got careless and sloppy –
because they did not live up to who they were
and they did not live up to their credentials.

In contrast their lack of vigilance and gross inattention,
we are called to live in anticipation of God's promises,
and to live our lives in eagerness and gracious vigor,
... and definitely not with our feet up resting in a *spiritual recliner*.

Peter's message was a call to seek with longing desire for the Lord,
by pointing toward familiar images
to describe what it means to live as God's own people,
based upon God's presence & promises already received, vs. 2-3
Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow - ... if
indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk.
You've heard the single-mindedness of when a hungry baby cries.

As God's own, who have tasted God's goodness & gracious blessings,
we're called to seek after that which nourishes our faith,
and to regularly and constantly hunger for more and more,
just as an infant requires frequent feedings.

Consider the sacramental moments of your own spiritual journey,
those amazing experiences when God has felt so close and so real,
and when you have personally tasted that our God is so good.

The idea is to crave and long for the pure, spiritual milk,
to desire above all a growing & deepening relationship with God
that doesn't get diluted by making compromises with culture
or desires less than the full blessings God intends for us...

... and we accomplish this as James and Peter both explain,
by focusing on the truth, the word and ways of God,
for we do tend to go **in the direction we are looking.**

It is a deepening understanding, trust and recognition of God,
and of the work of God happening in our lives and in the world,
to which we are called to faithful and active participation.
Faithful and useful discipleship, that is attentive and alert
to the Lord's ongoing presence and purpose in and through our lives.

Because of what we have been freely given through Christ,
we are challenged, to set our faith, trust and hope upon God...
... to have confidence in God's promise and purpose even when we can't
see it or fully recognize and understand what God is doing.

Being a Christian is foremost **about being loved by God,**
an empowering process and continuing blessing
that transforms us by the power of grace, born anew...
... which empowers us to proclaim and reflect
God's grace and light out into the world around us.

Now this holiness is not just obeying a bunch of old rules
or religious rituals for us to slavishly follow like Pharisees,
but it is living our lives the way that Jesus demonstrated,
a life of love, compassion, mercy and devotion to God,
and that is truthful lesson, message and connection
between the passage from James and the passage in 1st Peter.

**Our call is to keep a very loose grip on the things of this world,
and instead cling tightly to God, to God's grace and promises,
setting our faith and hope, our priority on God,
as we eagerly await for the best yet to come.**

So as we struggle with the challenges, trials and issues of life,
we can learn ¹to look for God's hand in the world around us,
²and more about God, God's love, God's grace, wisdom & truth
as we experience them in our lives and out in the world.

Our call is to grow and enlarge our faith & God's grace in our lives,
as by our faithful response we will become a gift back to God.

At conversion we are not set with complete faith and understanding,
but our faith grows as we struggle with life, issues & questions,
as we delve deeper into our relationship with our God
as we experience our God, **who is gracious and good.**

Now this is important:

**neither James nor Peter are suggesting that in any way
our good works are necessary or even contribute to saving us...**
... **but** we should consider and self-examine how we are living,
and are we truly living out this faith that we believe?,
and the promises and hope we have through Jesus Christ?

One of the measures of our faith, the authenticity of our faith,
and a test of our church as a faith community of Christians,
is in how well we treat one another, and the stranger?,
and do others experience God's grace from an encounter with us?

We're called to live & reflect God's own gracious kindness & mercy...
... and how can we claim that we walk with Jesus as our Lord,
and yet think & behave in ways that are angry or **that discriminate
against others who are also loved and created in God's image?**

**So what do my words, my deeds, my attitudes and my secret thoughts,
reveal about the authenticity and progress of my journey of faith?**

In one of his books, Robert Fulghum writes about a young boy
who finds several pieces of a broken mirror on the ground.

He keeps that largest piece to play with as a toy,
and becomes fascinated, that with that piece of mirror,
he can reflect light into shadows and dark places.
Eventually it becomes a game with that mirror, to move and adjust it,
and **shine light into the most inaccessible dark places he can find.**

That is an excellent and useful metaphor
that describes the message of both 1st Peter and James,

that as Christian disciples, as Children of the Light,
our call, challenge and task is to proclaim and reflect
the Light and hope we have received by grace and by faith
into the dark and troubled places of the world around us.

In a world that might say that some are nobodies who don't matter,
God disagrees – for God created and called each one to be his own,
and each one is a somebody whose precious life does matter, vs. 9
But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order
that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

As Jesus explains in the Gospels, (Jn 8:12, 3:19 & Matt 5:14~15)

I am the light of the world. The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather
than light. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.

You are the light of the world. ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your
good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.