

6th September, A.D. 2009

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 18

James 1:17-27

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Let us pray: Almighty God, help us to trust in you during uncertainty in our lives, the knowing of not knowing which makes us anxious. Help us to resist our pride which clouds our trust in you. For you are the Father of all glory, the Holy One who lights are paths when we walk in the shifting shadows. In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

James's epistle often gets a bad rap. Oh, no, not *James* again! Let's just skip James this year, some might beg. Martin Luther even ripped out the book of James. Reminds me of an ad I saw in a religious journal. Picture a coke can with these words on it: "Christianity Lite: Low Morality and Doctrine Free!" We live in a world of lite this and lite that. Lighten the load, we say! Which, of course, can be a good thing in reference to our health or workload sometimes. But when it comes to God's word to us—there is no New Testament Lite version. God's

revelation to us is something to be thankful for, not shunned, because his truth, his way, is always superior to ours. James's epistle this morning reminds us of this. That we are not to take hearing the word lightly...and that we are not to be hearers only, but we are also to be doers of the word.

When I read the first verse of James's epistle, "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above..." I can't help but think of the gift Holy Cross received to rebuild its structure. I don't want to bore you with that analogy every Sunday, but I guess when I sit and stare out my office window I'm reminded of it every day. I'm also reminded of the possibilities of the fruit of that gift. That many will be able to enjoy worshiping and hearing God's word in a beautiful, special place.

James reminds the church of its life in Christ. Every once in awhile we need a good reminder. Some reminders, however, drop down upon us like a ton of bricks. A priest stood up before his congregation one Sunday to remind them of the importance of giving to the church. He said, “I have good news and bad news. The good news is, we have enough money to pay for our new building program. The bad news is, it’s still out there in your pockets.” Now that’s a reminder! Not always a pleasant one, either!

Reminders often make us uncomfortable, uneasy, if you will, of what we ought to be in Christ. The funny thing is that we have reminders all around us. For example, the cross above the altar reminds us that we would not be here had not Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate and rose from the dead. The ceiling is vaulted to

remind us that our prayers are heard by God if we are sincere. There are candles which remind us of the light of Christ and without that light we are blind. There is the bread and wine which mysteriously feed us, after the prayer of consecration, the body and blood of Christ-after all, that is why we are here today. To be fed. And to be fed means several things but the most important is listening. To hear God speak in his word through the ministry of the Church.

One serious reminder is that as we are given gifts, it is important to remember that the the ultimate gift is our Saviour and Lord. And we must not only be receivers but givers. Doers, James emphasizes. Pay special attention here. After we have heard the implanted word, James follows up with a reminder to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only.” Don’t be

deceived, he says. We will be blessed in our doing. Now, I'm not preaching a works oriented salvation; and some churches de-emphasize the doer part for fear that folks will think it is the doing that saves them. James does not say we are saved by doing, but reminds us that if we hear only, and never do, then what do we really have? Are we just empty hulls? Fine on the outside, but nothing of substance has grown inside?

The urgency of James' message to the church cannot be swept under the carpet. We must face this apostolic message. We may have to wrestle with it, but the truth of it remains. James is warning us not to be self-deceived about the very nature of our salvation. Christ came into the world to save sinners. We know that. From Christ comes every theological truth--but not only is He theological Truth--he came

into the world with word and action. And what James is reminding the church here is that we must receive him with word and action. I admire James. He has this beautiful way to connect with his audience. Notice early in the passage he says, “Know this, my beloved brethren.” James has this endearment with his brothers and sisters. He’s not purposely “stepping on toes” but he is speaking the truth with love. He cherishes his relationship with whom he is writing. He loves his people so much that he is warning them not to be self-deceived about their salvation.

We should not be self-deceived either. We cannot claim salvation from death while we carelessly persist in sin which kills. Or refuse to be a doer of the Word. Sin is the thing that separates us from obedience. And it is through obedience that we find true

freedom. Think of the child who begs to do something or go somewhere that you know is dangerous. The child who says “I don’t care if no lifeguard is available, I want to jump in the lake or river or pool anyway.” But you’ve seen their lack of skills. You demand obedience that they not do a certain thing in order to protect them from harm. You have given them true freedom, because their life is being saved. But as adults, something happens. We tend to disregard obedience to God. We see it as an option—not as something that truly saves us. That grants us true freedom. We love to run our own lives--not being obedient to anyone or anything but our schedule, our routine. James wants to remind us of the first commandment: Have no other gods. Our desire often is “free to propose, seize, accept or reject, want or not

want--but not to obey.” Obey is that ugly word that gets in the way sometimes. We like to insulate ourselves from God and his word and James is saying you can’t do that. James is saying that you cannot be hearers of the truth only. You see, James is very concerned about self-centeredness. Look at what he says: “For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.”

James is consistent with the teachings of Christ. A true follower of Christ dies to self. When we die to self we become doers for the word of God. We practice obedience and we grow. James gives us an illustration: “visit the orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” James is

calling us to live with moral urgency, serious holiness, and unconditional obedience to the word of God. Have you ever gone to visit someone because you felt it your duty, at first, but by the time you left you were the one who was blessed? You were blessed by the afflicted, not the other way around. Mother Theresa often referred to the ministry she received from those whom she served. From the afflicted.

We have a high calling. As we become more mature in our faith and we see that the pursuit of holiness is far more satisfying than our own desires, then we shall see true joy in affliction. Serving others is not oppressive, but liberating. We can see joy in trials as hearers and doers of God's word. And as we get older and we become frail, we, as the true body of Christ, can embrace the true religion, and not grow weary, but

grow stronger through serving one another as Christ serves us. Our salvation in Christ changes our disposition towards our fellow parishioners: how? We should listen to the concerns of those whom we are in fellowship. James says “be slow to speak, slow to anger and put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word.” He doesn’t worry about making it palatable for us, does he?

Be hearers. Be doers. Be obedient. These are the things, along with prayer and worship, that fertilize our soul. That produce not only good fruit, but also true freedom. Amen.