

“What We Say and What We Do”

James 2:1-10, 14-17

There ought to be a warning. On the title page of the book of James in the New Testament, there should be a warning, like you see on television: “Warning: some scenes in the following program may not be suitable for young viewers!” There ought to be something like that at the beginning of the Epistle of James. “Warning! Reading the Epistle of James may disturb you, may cause you to question your Christianity.”

The problem with James is the same problem with some of those television programs – too explicit! Whereas in many of the other books of the Bible the writers are content to speak in generalities, James gives concrete examples, brings it right home. He meddles! He is a meddler. He doesn't let us get by with any of the fine-sounding, high minded phrases that we all like to bandy about: “We are God's people” or “we are followers of Christ.” James says, “Yeah? Show me! Put your money where your mouth is!”

We got a taste of just how direct James can be last week when he spoke of “pure religion” that is “undefiled before God.” You hear a phrase like that and the picture you get in your head, or at least the one I get in my head, is of someone meditating or someone praying in a cathedral. But James says, no. That's not it. Pure religion that is undefiled before God is not someone meditating or praying in a cathedral. It is someone taking soup to a neighbor who is sick, someone watching out for the kid down the street who always seems to be getting into trouble and seeing if they can give him some guidance, be a friend. It is doing, caring, helping, offering yourself to someone who needs help.

James makes you squirm! I defy anyone to read the Epistle of James without squirming. If you can do that you are a better Christian than I am. But, of course, that is not a terribly impressive accomplishment, in case you were thinking that it was! In any case, when I read James, I squirm.

Sometimes he gets downright annoying. He starts giving examples! Think about the coffee hour, he says. Whom do you hang out with at the coffee hour, he wants to know. Whom do you avoid? Or, let's say that you are ushering or greeting. It is your Sunday. So there you are handing out bulletins or greeting people as they come in, and here comes a really, really nice looking couple, all dressed up in their Sunday best. They look like they are ripe for the taking. They both look like they could be bankers, and you're thinking, “Gee, we could use some bankers!” Or maybe they teach at the community college or they have their own business. Professional people. Your eyes light up. You go on full membership alert! These folks are probably eligible for the elite gold membership status. And so you give them your best welcome and your brightest smile.

And then, you guessed it, a little while later someone else comes in looking not quite so well put together -- could use a little grooming. You are polite, you are friendly. You're a Christian, after all. But “church member” is not the first thought that leaps to your mind, at least not the elite gold membership category – maybe coach.

So James sets up this little scenario and lets us think about it for a minute or two and then he lowers the boom! “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” You see what he is doing? He is calling our bluff! We say we are Christians, that we believe in Jesus! That we love God! And he says, “Do you really?” I tell you, there ought to be a warning! Stay away from the Book of James!

Last Sunday I made the statement that all of us are hypocrites. I was thinking later that that might have been a little harsh. What I really meant was that sometimes our words get ahead of our actions. When we came to our last hymn last week, #391, "Take My Life," I was thinking about the words. Here we were, all singing this hymn lustily (are Presbyterians are allowed to sing lustily?). I was singing, we were all singing these words written by Frances Ridley Havergal:

*Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee. Take my moments and my days;
let them flow in ceaseless praise, let them flow in ceaseless praise.*

Well, that's not too bad. Pretty general. Take my moments and my days. Not too bad. *Ceaseless praise* might be a little overdone. Maybe occasional praise. But not bad. Then, like James, she starts getting a little more specific:

*Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love. Take my feet, and let them be
swift and beautiful for Thee, swift and beautiful for Thee.*

Some of us will never again have feet that could be described as swift and some of us have never had feet that could be described as beautiful. But ok. We get the point. Hands and feet. Someone has said that Jesus is no longer here. If someone is going to get that bowl of soup, it won't be Jesus' feet that that it – it will have to be ours. If someone is going to feel the healing touch it will not be Jesus' hands, but ours. We are his hands and his feet.

*Take my voice, and let me sing, always, only, for my King. Take my lips, and let them be
filled with messages from Thee, filled with messages from Thee.*

That's nice. It doesn't necessarily apply to all of us, but it's nice. Then we get to the fourth stanza. Now she has quit preaching and started meddling:

Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold;

OK. Now we're in serious trouble! Take my silver and my gold. Take my CDs, my savings, my 401ks, take my investments, take it all! Who among us can really say that? Maybe Francis of Assisi. Not me! "Not a mite would I withhold." Oh, I don't think so. Maybe in one sense it is true. We don't withhold the mite. That's the part we are willing to give to God. We give God the mite. The rest is the part we withhold, the bulk of it!

*Take my will, and make it Thine; it shall be no longer mine. Take my heart, it is Thine own;
it shall be Thy royal throne, it shall be Thy royal throne.*

I'm not saying that we shouldn't sing these hymns lustily. But maybe on some of the stanzas, if we are honest, we should cross our fingers!

And then James gives another explicit example. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Now I have to tell a story that is painful for me to tell, even after all these years. It happened in 1976. It was our second church and we had only been there a little over a year, and this text came up, these words that I just read.

I was taking my sermon over to the sanctuary, which involved going through the church basement. As I was bounding up the steps, sermon in hand, someone opened the door at the top of the stairs that led to the parking lot, and stepped in. It was a young man. He wasn't dressed for church. He was asking for help. He said his wife and his baby were in the car on their way somewhere and they were out of milk for the baby and they hadn't eaten themselves for quite a while. Could we help them, even if it was just some milk for the baby?

And this in the part I would rather forget. I didn't have any money on me, as I recall, and we didn't have a Deacon's Fund, and I couldn't think of any way to help. (Obviously, I wasn't thinking hard enough.) So I suggested to him that he might try the Salvation Army. But of course the nearest Salvation Army was in Burlington, back nine miles the opposite direction from where they were headed. So I basically said no. And he left. He looked angry.

When he was gone I was alone again. I had been interrupted. Now I could get back to what I was doing. I was taking my sermon over to the sanctuary to be delivered shortly. Do you recall the story of the Good Samaritan, where the priest sees the wounded man lying there in the ditch and walks by on the other side? You're looking at him!

What was my sermon on? It was on this very text: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Now I know that this sounds like a made up story. The coincidence is just too obvious. But believe me, I didn't make it up. It happened exactly that way. As soon as it hit me what I had done, I went running out to the parking lot, but of course, they were gone. How can I describe how I felt? I felt like a hypocrite. I felt like I had failed. With good reason – I had. And, beyond that, I thought for the first time about this family, about the baby without milk, about the parents who were hungry.

In that church we had our education hour before worship. I went into one of the adult classes and interrupted the class. I told them what had just happened and told them what I was going to preach on. I told them I didn't know what to do. Someone suggested that I just tell the congregation what happened. So I did. During the sermon I told the congregation what had happened and what I had done. After the service someone gave me ten dollars to begin a fund for people in need. That was the beginning of a Deacon's Fund in that church.

I was young and green at that time, without much experience with this sort of thing. Now I am old and experienced, maybe a little more cynical. There are those out there who know how to work the system. And there are those out there who really need our help. Sometimes it is hard to know the difference. But James would tell us that we've got to try. He would say that our Christianity doesn't amount to much if we don't. He would say that if our faith doesn't produce some action at some point, then it's not real faith.

So, if you are thinking about reading the Book of James, let me offer a warning: read it at your own risk!