

Setting Priorities

Many documents circulated in the first and second after Jesus' death among the early believers. Not all were included in what has become our New Testament accounting of Jesus' life ministry and teachings. A few years ago, some of them which had not been seen for centuries were "discovered" and called the "lost" gospels of Christianity. They actually weren't lost...they were documents from traditions that were rejected and were in a way buried...they were determined to be heresies...not true representations of the Jesus of Nazareth' teachings. Early church leaders gathered in the third century at Nicaea to study all of these documents and determine which ones reflected God's direction for the church and mission. From that council, we have the Nicene Creed. Human beings being human beings...another major split occurred between the Eastern Church and the Western Church; then later as human behavior again entered the institution that was the church another division occurred known as the Reformation. This is a matter of interest because when the Reformation began, it was also a time of many great social changes in the world—the printing press allowed access to the written word to many more people and the Bible was translated into more languages...and as this split in the church occurred the topic of which books should be included again became a topic of discussion. Today there are available two versions of every translation—both versions widely accepted by most denominations—the difference being whether or not the Apocryphal or Deuterocanonical books are included. Apocryphal books were written about Hebrew biblical figures by those the Jewish diaspora and are included in a section between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Another book whose inclusion was debated was the one which gave us our passage for today: the letter of James. Most of the New Testament is actually Pauline...the four gospel accounts which are actually about Jesus make up a relatively small amount of the New Testament texts. The greater amount of the text comes from the letters which Paul wrote to the various assemblies that he had established or from those who wrote in his name. Martin Luther called the letter from James "an epistle of straw" based on his rejection of the Roman Catholic institution and teachings which led him to post his 95 Thesis document which marks the official beginning of the Protestant Reformation movement. From his study of the scriptures, Luther began to believe that the words found in Paul's letters formed the basis for the doctrine that is now known as justification by faith. Luther was a very early leader of the Reformation movement, and was hypersensitive to anything that seemed to him to challenge the absolute importance of that role in God's redemptive plan for the world. But although faith is essential because it is by faith that we are enabled to become truly the "new creature" able to love as our Lord loves, to leave behind the prejudices and self-love which is so destructive...if we do not truly embody our Lord and become able to love...then our faith withers. It seems that justification by faith alone is not the sum total of the gospel...of the good news that Jesus brought...for when he proclaimed the reign of God was near he was showing healing and the restoration of people into community...he was doing. A few years after Luther began the Reformation, John Calvin had broadened the church's understanding of salvation with his doctrine of "double grace." "Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped by us and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father, and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's Spirit, we may

cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.” Paul continually wrote to his former assemblies that their belief enabled them to be “new creatures”, ones no longer living as they had been before they learned of Jesus and his teachings, before the Holy Spirit came to abide in them. The letter from James actually explores two questions that are essential to our life of faith. The first question is “Who is God?” The answer given by James in his opening chapter is a clear presentation of the good news—the gospel. James introduces himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. The passage for this week explores two questions. The first is, “Who is God?” James response James presents is pure gospel. God is identified by what he gives. “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.” All of this generous giving, including the gift of Christ, is in fulfillment of God’s own purpose...so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures...that we would become “new”. This is done through his word of truth, which in the context of James is acceptance of the gospel—the identity and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. This acceptance of Jesus means a new life...a new relationship with God...which according to James makes those entering this new life “first fruits”. To be a “first fruit” in the Hebrew tradition is to belong to God, to be claimed by God, to be wanted by God. James is telling those who are recipients of this letter that having accepted Christ, their lives should reflect this new relationship with their Lord. This brings up the second question that this passage considers: “Who are you?” James is saying, look at yourself closely; does your life look any differently now that you have entered this new relationship with God? In other words, this text is asking us to consider how the gospel message is about more than our justification; it is also about how we are given the mission to bring God’s ways into being in the here and now...it is about the process of our sanctification, imperfect though the process may be. In the verses for today and throughout the letter, James drives toward the point that our theological integrity—our whole-hearted, consistent, comprehensive devotion to God—actually requires of us a particular kind of life and character. According to James, if the Lord Jesus has come to abide in a person that persons’ faith will exhibit a certain type of character which reflects his teachings; a type of character that must truly care about those in the community around them; a type of caring which is active, not passive. Thus James wrote that believers must be “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” In many ways this sounds like wisdom literature, but how often in our interactions with others if we were more open to listening, truly listening before speaking would there be less anger and hard feelings—would we be more able to show more compassion and understanding toward others—even if we did not agree with them? James’ instruction to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves also presents us with an interesting image about those who look in a mirror but easily forget what they have seen. Verse 23: “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.” To James if you have a divine teaching and don’t put it into practice, you are not benefiting from the teaching; you remain a half-hearted, semi-committed believer. It is as if you see an image in a looking glass, it is a superficial thing, and the details are easy to miss or forget. To keep the image fresh in your mind you need to keep going back for another look. James compares being not a hearer but a doer who acts as one who looks into the “perfect law” ...if you look there for your self-understanding you will find an enduring standard of who you are

and should be...something that is not a reflection but a reality that grounds one. James also notes that those who are doers of God's perfect law will be blessed in their doing. James's goal, here, is not simple adherence to Torah (or any law), but the kind of ingrained habitual knowledge that comes from repetition and practice. This doing of the "Law" of God is what abiding in Christ enables us to do. Just as the Ten Commandments are introduced by the good news of deliverance from the house of bondage from slavery, so this very Jewish letter from James assumes our deliverance and calls us to live as liberated people under the perfect law that gives us freedom. This is why Christ came to redeem us and the purpose for which we are redeemed to continue the work of the redemption of the world God so loves. In our gospel passage for today, Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees has often been reduced an explanation for the removal of the strict dietary rules governing Jewish life. These statements certainly accomplish that. But Jesus was pointing out something more fundamentally harmful about the Pharisees' approach to the Law given to them at Sinai. Through the centuries since the people had received the original instructions which were all meant to life affirming ways of living together in community, things had been added and interpreted. These additions had become more important than the original instructions which Jesus pointed out to them through the use of a quotation from the Isaiah scroll. This is not an unusual occurrence in human history—even with the best of intentions a look back at history shows that humankind often goes in directions which are not in keeping with what they are proclaiming as their goals. At this point, Jesus directs his attention to the crowd which seems to always be around. He tells them: "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." While this debate about dietary matters was a concern for the early church, it has been many years since it was a matter where we considered what we ate was a matter that would cause us religious defilement—the issue the Pharisees were addressing. However, the issue which Jesus addresses clearly seems different...as he address what comes from within as being the cause of defilement. "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come..." Jesus lists quite a few...theft, adultery,...even pride and envy...many of the things that are given as things to avoid in those "perfect laws" given at Mount Sinai. All of these evil things come from within, and they defile a person, says our Lord. The remedy for this is given to us...and the letter from James speaks of it...the remedy comes through our active faith...the abiding of our Lord within...as an active guide for our lives...as the one who sets our priorities for our words and deeds...the one who makes us not only a hearer of the word but a doer of it as well. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.