

## Sermon – Sept 6, 2009

I speak to you in the name of God, the Author of all life, the source of all possibilities, the Creator and Redeemer of all that has been, all that is, and all that is to come. Amen.

*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:  
Greetings.*

Both last week and today we have been treated to readings from the wonderful letter of James' – the opening greeting you just heard. This letter has a number of remarkable features. First of all, it is not written to a particular group, as Paul often did. This is a general letter, written to all the Christian churches throughout the dispersion – In other words, the cities and towns all around the Mediterranean where the Jewish people had dispersed to over the years. The reference to the twelve tribes is a strong indication that the author sees the Christian church as the heir of Israel – a true continuation of the Jewish spiritual tradition.

For many years it was assumed that it was written by James the brother of the Lord who was a key leader of the Early Church in Jerusalem. However, certain aspects of the letter – it's excellent Greek, it's easy use of idiom and it's apparent knowledge of other Christian writings such as the letters of Peter and Paul, as well as the gospel of Matthew, all seem to suggest that the author was a Greek speaking leader of the Christian community, probably in the latter part of the first century.

The letter is an excellent example of themes and variations from the "Sermon on the Mount."

At the beginning of the letter he says:

*My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, <sup>3</sup>because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; <sup>4</sup>and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. 1:2-4*

Compare to this from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew:

*11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely<sup>b</sup> on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. 5:11-12*

Later on James says:

12 *Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord<sup>d</sup> has promised to those who love him. 1:12*

Again compare to this from the Sermon on the Mount:

10 *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 5:10*

James' was speaking to Christians who were now living between two worlds: The world of traditional Judaism and The world of the Gentiles, the Romans and Greeks. And because of this, James is very concerned about reminding these Christians about how they ought to live. James assumes that his hearers already have Christian faith, but there is much emphasis on putting this faith into action.

For example last week we heard this:

22*Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*

27*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

17*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.*

So in other words, be generous in your actions toward others just as God in heaven has been generous toward you. Be a reflection of God's compassion and generosity.

This same theme continues on into our reading for this morning. James says:

14*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16and 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? 17So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

*You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according*

*to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." 9But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*

In other words, put your faith in action. Be a reflection of God's compassion and generosity, and do so without any partiality. This is what it is to live as a Christian says the author of this letter.

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For those who have grown up in the church, we can sometimes forget how radical this call to Christian living was. In the ancient world, showing compassion and generosity was something reserved for ones own kin - one's family, tribe members and close friends. It makes perfect sense to do this because you are interconnected with them and often there is a strong sense of interdependence - you rely on each other. But the idea of showing compassion outside of ones tribe or people without partiality was unusual. It's true, the law to love one's neighbour as oneself is found in the old testament book of Leviticus. But it was referring to one's neighbouring kin. To display generosity to those outside your kin would have seemed like a strange concept. This really was radical. It changed the concept of neighbour into basically anyone you meet - or even hear about.

When Christians started doing this, some pretty amazing things started to happen. Barriers between certain groups of people started to soften and disappear. People began to think more and more as though every person had intrinsic worth regardless of their background and situation in life. Rich, poor - slave, free - gentile or Jew. All were now one in the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ. In other words - everyone belongs. This was pretty radical. And yet it is such an important part of who we have become as a society and culture in the western world. It is why the British abolished slavery. It is why Canadians feel that universal healthcare is so important. It is why Christian organizations such as the Primates World Relief and Development Fund has worked for 50 years to provide help to people on the other side of the country or the other side of the world - people we don't even know.

But as I mentioned in my sermon three weeks ago, these values that we have come to cherish are not immune to erosion. Every once in a while I see examples in our society where compassion and generosity are only shown to a select few. Partiality is popping up here there and everywhere - and what is really disturbing is that some people think of it as entirely normal and appropriate. When that happens then what our society is saying is that not everyone fully belongs.

It seems pretty clear to me that without a strong spiritual tradition, our society could easily slip back into a pre-Christian mode of living. A mode of living where it is

accepted that some people have more rights than others or some people belong more than others.

This is totally unacceptable. So as James' says, let's be doers of the word. Let's continue to be reflections of God's compassion and generosity - and do so without partiality. Let's continue to be the yeast in our community that reminds them that everyone belongs.

INFSHS. Amen.

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