

A God We Can Trust  
James 1:17-27

I enjoy both personal and group Bible study. Many times I have conducted surveys of the entire Bible or the New Testament with church groups. Almost every time I lead a class through the New Testament book by book I find that interest picks up when we move from Hebrews into the Letter of James. There are more questions and there is better discussion. Most persons who read the Bible consistently express a fondness for James. It's not hard to see why. James is not a book of theology or philosophy. The message of James is simple and direct; it speaks to some of our basic problems in ways that are easy to understand; and it gives practical advice on how to treat other people and get along with folks both in the church and in the world.

I have always liked this letter. I never study this book without remembering that the first sermon I ever prepared was based on James 4:8: "Draw nigh to God, and God will draw nigh to you" (KJV). James has held a special place in my Bible reading and study all my life. However, for a long time I took James for granted. Until recently I did not fully appreciate the subtle way that James appeals to our thought and our faith.

A couple of years ago I found a fascinating book called *The Jesus Dynasty* by James Tabor who teaches Religious Studies at UNC Charlotte. In a chapter on the leadership of James, the brother of Jesus, Tabor makes two comments that grabbed my attention. He says that even though James was almost written out of New Testament records, he "remains our best and most direct link to the historical Jesus" (p. 272). A little later Tabor writes, "The letter of James contains the most direct possible link to the teachings of Jesus himself. James is essentially echoing and affirming what he had learned and passed on from his brother Jesus" (pp. 276-277).

I went from Tabor's book to James and to my commentaries. James does sound a lot like Jesus' teachings, especially those collected under the Sermon on the Mount. There are thirty passages in the short letter of James that are virtually identical to statements of Jesus in the canonical gospels. The short, pithy sayings, the absence of

abstract ideas, the compassionate approach to relationships, the emphasis on ethics—so many things in James make you think that perhaps you are listening to Jesus himself! I now think that that is what makes us like the Book of James so much.

James nearly failed to make it into the Bible. When the New Testament was being formed, church leaders wanted to emphasize Paul’s approach to “salvation by grace” over James’ concern with deeds. Also, the church wanted to stress the leadership role of Peter in the first century. James was not regarded as a part of the New Testament until the middle of the fourth century.

James deals with some of the basics of faith. In only 108 verses it contains 59 imperatives, or guidelines for belief and action. These guidelines can be grouped under several themes—relating to God in trust, the definition of true religion, recognizing the dignity of all persons, the awareness of the power of speech, and the place of prayer and the presence of God in life. I have been looking forward to our lectionary getting to James, and over the next five weeks I want us to think about these concepts. And to use our imaginations! Imagine Jesus and his brothers growing up together discussing what they read and studied in synagogue. Imagine James following Jesus as a disciple and watching, learning, sharing, and finally passing on the message of Jesus. Let’s visualize a link here to Jesus himself.

We begin in James where Jesus began in his own ministry. We consider our relationship with God. In a casual reading of the letter I counted more than two dozen references to God and to his connection with us. So we start today with what James teaches about “A God We Can Trust.”

In Bible study and in preaching we talk often about “trusting” God. “Trusting God” is one of those expressions that has been used so much that it has become almost meaningless. After all, even our money is stamped with “In God we trust.” It bothers me that “trusting God” sometimes becomes no more than a trite phrase that we use to fill in the blank spaces of our religious talk. It seems to me that trust in God should mean

something if a person is going to have a vital religious life, experience prayer as more than a formality, and gain any sense of peace with God and with the world.

And yet, I wonder whether we do not make trust difficult. Trust is a natural inclination. We need, even want, to trust God. But can we trust God as we have presented God? Listen to the words we use. We tend to say that God is “out there” or “up there.” One of the great thinkers of the twentieth century described God as “wholly other.” Do those phrases not suggest that God is removed or apart from us? Or, we say that God is holy. We know that we are not holy, so again we mean that God is separated from us. Some like to speak of the “fear of God.” How can you trust someone whom you fear? So many other issues cloud our understanding. We read the Bible and talk about what God did “then.” The obvious question is why God does not do those things now. Or, we speak of seeing God in the “afterlife.” Don’t you want to ask why we have to wait? What about this life?

Our thinking gets muddled, doesn’t it? I suspect that a lot of folks are content to let the concept of trusting God remain just that, a concept. Wouldn’t it make life infinitely more meaningful if a person really lived in a trust relationship with God? Hear the way James puts it: If you face temptation, look to God for deliverance; if you need wisdom, seek it from God; if you want to understand yourself, try to see how God sees you; if you want to serve others, share the gifts God has made to you; if you want to deal with a problem, ask for God’s help. James counsels his readers to trust in almost the same way that Jesus did. You don’t need to prove the existence or the nature of God, you don’t need to test God, and you don’t need to worry about God’s attitude. Ask, seek, knock! Had James heard that somewhere.

In today’s text James says two things about God that I find profoundly helpful. He writes, “Every good and generous action and every perfect gift come from above, from the Father who created the lights of heaven. With him there is no variation, no play of passing shadows.” While James is not a theological work, some of the early Christian

fathers said that this comment is one of the noblest theological statements in the New Testament.

Think first about the expression “Father who created the lights of heaven.” Sounds a bit strange, doesn’t it? However, remember that Jesus taught his followers to call God “Father.” James learned that lesson. We are to see God as lovingly involved in our lives. The “lights of heaven” says something about our creation and the creation of all things. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” John wrote that this light enlightens everyone who comes into the world.

The point is that God has filled our lives with his light. We are his creation, and that creation is good. Instead of a God who holds a kind of impossible standard over our heads and threatens us with eternal punishment if we do not adhere to his requirements, we have a God who has created us in love and who longs for our fulfillment.

We have a luminosity about us. Wayne Muller has said that if we can accept that “our soul is naturally luminous and that we are filled with innate, natural perfection, if we are the light of the world, then when we sink into quiet we return to peace.” (*Sabbath*, p. 42.) He adds that the reason people stay so busy is not that they want to get things done but that they want to avoid the terrors and dangers of feeling empty. If you are afraid of God, you keep busy so you don’t have to encounter him. If you know that God is always on your side, you want to experience him. Thomas Merton said that we have a “hidden wholeness.” Life is blessed and full because God made it so. And God continues to re-make it so! God is the Father of lights.

And God delights in giving. Jesus had said, “How much more will your Father give good gifts to those who ask him” (Mt. 7:11). James conveys the same idea: “Every good and generous action and every perfect gift come from above.” God gives. God gives all that we can accept. Can we not trust such a God?

As I move further along my personal pilgrimage, I become more and more convinced that one of the biggest obstacles that you and I need to overcome is our reluctance to receive what God longs to give. I think at bottom we know that God can be trusted. In spite of all the excuses we give and the barriers we set up, I believe that God has given so much of himself to us that we are drawn to him. Receiving is the hard part.

Trusting God, as simple as that seems, is the essence of faith. A trusting relationship is our highest calling. The other day I ran across the “four stages of Christian growth” as defined by Bernard of Clairvaux, a thirteenth century Christian mystic. I had not seen them for some time. Bernard said that we begin life with a “love of self for self’s sake.” By that he means that we seek what we need and want. We develop a “love of God for self’s sake,” that is, we seek what God can give us to make us happy. It’s still a fairly selfish love. Then, as we grow, we find a “love of God for God’s sake.” That is the ability to worship and thank God in a mature fashion. You would think that is the highest form of religious expression. But Bernard took growth one step further. He said that if we continue growing, we develop a “love of self for God’s sake.” By that he meant that we learn to receive God’s gifts in full. Like a child we receive and delight in the joy.

I think that is the kind of hope James expresses. Wisdom, strength, peace, sense of adequacy, fullness of joy—God longs to give us all those things!

J. William Harris  
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