

June 3, 2018
James: To Know the Good and Do It
James 4:7-17

"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands ... and purify your hearts ... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

James is calling us to a new identity, a new calling, a new way of being, a whole new personhood. We are people whose lives are centered in and on Jesus. We are people who are rediscovering what it means to be created in the image of God, to be His people, His ambassadors, His priests in His world, a world now wandered far from Him.

We are new people in Jesus. Paul writes, *"If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"* (2 Corinthians 5:17).

They are calling us back to the original identity and calling we had in the very beginning – people – male and female – created in His image, for fellowship with Him, with one another, and with responsibility to be stewards of His amazing creation (Genesis 2:15). Through Jesus' work on the cross, our sin is dealt with. We are forgiven and restored for a full and free relationship with God, one another, and as caretakers of His world.

There is a certain healthy, holy solemnity to this. When we go through any major life transition – graduation, change in jobs, baptism, marriage, becoming a parent – there is a holy awe, a sense of solemn responsibility, a profound pathos that accompanies such times. We know the old is passing on, and something new and better is beginning.

There is also a profound sense of joy and anticipation in such times. As God "comes near" to us and as He "lifts us up" we experience a transcendent joy that comes from knowing the peace and presence, the power and pleasure of our God and Saviour, of our Father and His Spirit, alive and at work in our lives.

How, then, ought to we live? Jesus spelled it out very clearly for us: *"The most important commandment is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these"* (Mark 12:29-31).

Harsh Reality

This, of course is how it ought to be ... In fact, we struggle to live out these noble principles in the mucky muck of everyday life, in the bruising reality of day-to-day. James has just talked about nasty words (3:1-13), envy and selfishness (3:13-18),

fighters (4:1-3). James continues, *"Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you – who are you to judge your neighbor?"* (4:11-12).

He's talking about a kind of cancer that works its way through some churches: the subtle murmur of innuendo, background chatter of gossip, or soft subtext of snide-ness, a low rumble of judgment that taints everything. Like Adam and Eve in the very beginning, we like to think we know better than God about all sorts of things – the church, other people, heresy ... We know it would be wrong for "ordinary people" to whisper or judge – but we're not "ordinary people," are we?

That law about "loving your neighbour" is for "ordinary people" but we are above it. It's for beginners in the faith, and we are so much more mature. And yet James has already said, *"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right"* (James 2:8).

When we think we're above the law, the law does not apply to us, or others are heretics, we are setting ourselves up as those "sitting in judgement on the law." We are the ones deciding who it applies to (you) and who it doesn't apply to (me). But think for a moment: whose law is it? It's **God's** law. Therefore, who has the right to choose to whom it does and doesn't apply? Only **God**. When we set up ourselves as magistrates of God's law, we are claiming to be God – a rather precarious place to be!

When we speak ill of or judge others, we are missing the boat of the wonderful calling, identity, and personhood to which God has called us. We have ceased to be the free people He has redeemed us to be – in full fellowship with God, one another, and His creation. Instead, we have reverted to our old ways: suspicious, self-centered, grasping, conniving, competing, angry, fundamentally miserable – trapped in bitterness.

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Approach life with humility

But here in the real world, life's tough. I've got a living to make. And it's all up to me to make it or break it on this world. God may be a nice tag-along for Sunday morning, but in the dog-eat-dog world of life, God is irrelevant. This is **MY** world; I know best.

"Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money,'" adds James, *"Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a*

little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil" (4:13-16) – more on that theme next week.

Jesus told a story in Luke 12 about a man who had many barns. He had a good crop; he would build bigger barns and then relax and live an indulgent life: *"I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'" (Luke 12:16-20)*

"This," Jesus says, "is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God" (12:21).

Life on the road has the illusion of complete freedom. You're your own boss, and you can do as you please. It can also give the illusion of invincibility (4:13). But the truth is, we are all one breath away from our last (4:14). This isn't meant to be a spoiler on life, but to ensure that we hold loosely to the things of this world, always living with the perspective that things could go sideways at any moment. And so we live with a profound humility. What we have is a blessing from God. If we don't have great things, we are still blessed by God in other ways (4:16).

James isn't saying 'Don't plan', but is urging us to hold our plans loosely, because God may have other plans (4:15). Directly after Jesus tells the story of the man and his barns, He adds, *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?"*

"Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well" (Luke 12:22-31).

Remember what really matters – what is most important – is who we are as God's beloved, chosen people, His royal priests, created in His image for relationship with Him, with one another, and with our Father's world. There is a healthy, holy humility that comes from knowing who we are: we are NOT God. But we are His children:

As a father has compassion on his children,

*so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
The life of mortals is like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field;
the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.
But from everlasting to everlasting
the Lord's love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's children—
with those who keep his covenant
and remember to obey his precepts.
(Psalm 103:13-18)*

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Life lived "near to God"

What does it look like to live when you "draw near to God and he comes near to you"? When you "humble yourself before the Lord and He lifts you up?" When we come to God, He has a way of helping us to see ourselves more clearly: the good, the bad, and the ugly. There is a healthy, holy cleansing that happens. It's a good process, but it can be a bit of a painful transition. But then we can become who God created us to be. Jesus saved and redeemed us to do His good work: *"It is by grace we have been saved, through faith ... We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"* (Ephesians 2:9-10).

It's a matter of finding creative ways to live that life for which we were created, for which we are redeemed through the cross of Christ, for which we are indwelt by His Spirit. We live those great positive principles: we aim to love God, with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. We aim to truly love our neighbour as ourselves. James puts it negatively: *"If anyone knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them"* (4:17). We could put it positively, *"If anyone knows the good they ought to do, and does it, then they are doing God's will."*

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