



From the Community Pulpit

January 4, 2009

JAMES: Ingredients for a Worthy Religion

#1 in the "YOU'VE GOT MAIL!" series

Text: James 1:22-27

Sunday Morning – 8:30 am & 10:30 am

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Communion Invitation by Rev. Melissa St. Clair

Offertory Invitation by Dr. Tom G. Haley

◇ COMMUNITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH ◇ 4601 MAIN STREET ◇ KANSAS CITY ◇ MISSOURI ◇ 64112 ◇ 816.561.6531 ◇

WWW.COMMUNITY-CHRISTIAN.ORG

SERMON by Robert Lee Hill

Happy New Year! To start off the New Year, on this first Sunday of the year 2009, we begin a brand new sermon series, "*You've Got Mail!*," based on shorter letters in the New Testament. While some people may be familiar with the hallmark gospel texts (*Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*) and with some of the more prominent letters by the apostle Paul (*I & II Corinthians, Romans, Philippians*, for example), the shorter letters sometimes go begging for attention.

So, over the course of the months of January and February, we'll explore the sheer power of the shorter letters including Paul's correspondence with Timothy and the Thessalonians, as well as his seeming "text message" to Philemon. We'll also examine a letter by Peter and the one-chapter long letter by Jude.

A reading schedule has been provided for this journey through these brief but important letters, and it will be fairly easy for each of us to read through seven books of the New Testament by the time we arrive at February 22. I hope and trust this series will lead us all to a better appreciation of the great graces available throughout the New Testament.

James – This first message in the new series centers on the book of James. There is in James' a fervent focus on the practical dimensions of the Christian faith which is also balanced by an equal emphasis on the "enoughness" of God's grace.

James is among seven books in the New Testament that are called the "catholic" (meaning universal) epistles. The general grouping of the books of the New Testament goes as follow: the Gospels and the book of Acts, written by gospeler Luke, then apostle Paul's letters to the churches, which are followed by Paul's letters to persons (Timothy, Titus, and Philemon), and then the letters not written by Paul but adjudged by the Church to be important enough to be included in what we call the New Testament today. This latter group is where James belongs. These letters are given their names – James, I and II Petter, I, II, and III

John – by the person who is presumed to have written them.

Now, just because James is little and comes so late in the arrangement of the books of the New Testament, do not underestimate its enduring capacity to stimulate faith.

James is a peculiar and a much disputed and a much appreciated letter. If you were to look on the "postmarks" on James letter – garnered from the rounds it made among the congregations in the Church's first few centuries' of existence – you'd behold a fairly maltreated piece of mail, tattered at the corners and punched by every postal station imaginable.

Early Church Father's Regard – In the Early Church Father's reading of the book of James, they didn't find much to be quotable. Tertulian, one of the most prolific of the fathers would quote portions of the New Testament 7,258 times in his theological treatises. But never once does he quote James. The great Jerome gave a begrudging seal of approval for James, saying it was "OK," but he was still uncertain about James' authorship. It would take Augustine finally in 393 (council of Hippo), 397 and 419 (both at Carthage) to vouch that this was not only an important letter but also an authentic letter written by Jesus' brother James, head of the church in Jerusalem after Jesus' resurrection.¹

Syrian Church – There are on this letter five centuries of postmarks from the Syrian churches, for it wasn't until the fifth century that the Syrian church finally accepted it as scripture.²

Greek Church – On James' envelope there are also postmarks from the churches where Greek culture had an impact. But it would take Athanasius's Easter letter to confirm James' dependability.³

Martin Luther – There is a peculiar postmark from Germany, handwritten it seems, from one Martin Luther, who, in the process of his reforming ways, described James as "an epistle of straw,"⁴ and even went so far as to write on its envelope, "*Return to Sender, who is Satan who resides in Rome.*"⁵ The reason for Luther's disgust? Primarily because of James' emphasis on the "works" of faith.

Still, ultimately, James has come to us as part of the Bible, tattered corners and all, disputations and all, not only as a besmirched and much traveled epistle, but rather as a missive of massive importance for you and me. To mix our metaphors a bit and to emphasize the e-mail reference of our sermon series title, James has finally arrived in your faith's e-mail in-box with the announcement that "You've Got Mail!" As you open it, may you see it is a much-forwarded communication, sent by one friend to another to another, before you finally arrive, nearly exhausted at the letter's contents. But arrive you do, and then you behold:

- A lot of imperatives (60+) in the 108 verses of James.
- Only one reference to Christ (which is another of the letter's features to which Luther objected)
- A tone of urgency that seems to imply the author's assumption about Christ's forthcoming return, what the Church has described as "The Second Coming."
- The recipients of the letter are obviously poor.⁶
- The instructions are firm and forceful regarding how James believes Christians are supposed to live. There isn't much nuance in James; he proclaims with conviction and means to convert all of us readers with as much moral suasion as we can stand: "This is the right way! Follow it!"

Ingredients for a Worthy Religion

One of the more important messages we can gather from this mail from James are the key ingredients for any religion worth having. And those ingredients are found in our text for the morning.

(1) ... be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves....

In other words, your faith is to have integrity between what you hear in worship and what you do in response in the world. In still other words, don't be hypocrites, that is, hearing the faith and perhaps even saying it, but never enacting it your life.

William Barclay put it this way: "... that which is heard in the holy place is to be lived in the market place."⁷

My dear friend Rabbi Michael Zedek put it this way, after the fashion of Rabbi Leo Baeck, famed leader of progressive Judaism, who said, "More important than the sermon the rabbi gives is the sermon the rabbi is."

And William Willimon, when commenting on this text, asks "[W]hat will we do with that which we have said, sung, and heard [in worship]?" Then he reminds us Christians of the normal interchange between preacher and a member at the door after the service. "Pastor, that was a wonderful sermon," said the parishioner "That remains to be seen," said the preacher."⁸

I can easily see why James puts this imperative so prominently toward to beginning of his letter, since it is hypocrisy that harms a religion's reputation and a believer's integrity more than almost anything else. I've listened to countless tales of folks who have been bruised

by the lack of integrity and sometimes abject hypocrisy of what they heard in the churches of their youth (like love and caring and compassion) and then what they beheld as that church's inactions (inactions like cold indifference and hard judgmentalism) beyond Sunday.

(2) ... bridle [your] tongues

Of all the books in the New Testament, James is the most pointed in highlighting the harm and hurt that loose lips can do in human relations. False witness, uninformed commentary, and worst of all, gossip – these are weapons of pernicious destruction in human affairs. In the movie *Doubt*, Father Flynn preaches powerfully about the ill effects of gossip by likening gossip to the release of pillow feathers in the wind. Father Flynn must have read the book of James.

But, note with me that there are also two other unavoidably beautiful and powerful declarations for any religion that is worthy, according to James: "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."

(3) ... care for orphans and widows....

This is a fundamental way of caring for the most vulnerable members of the community. For James and the community he led this would amount to a social security system, since orphans and widows had no one to provide for their long-term care and overall well-being. By caring for orphans and widows one helps to preserve not only their dignity and human regard but their actual health and survivability.

I'm glad to say that Community has been doing this in some significant new ways over the last several months. First, we've begun providing meals of support and caring love for those who experience the loss of a loved one. Regardless of your situation or need, even if you're one of the top chefs in Kansas City, you will receive a meal each week for six weeks after your beloved dies. And regarding those who might be called orphans, we have Jean Sailors and the 100 Community folks who responded to the recent challenge by *Cornerstones of Care* to provide gifts for children and youth who otherwise would have had little to celebrate at Christmas time if it were not for your generosity.

(4) ... to keep oneself unstained by the world....

This has to mean not disengaged, but unstained. Not unentangled, but unsullied. Not untouched, but uncorrupted. For James is a highly practical set of instructions about matters that are truly "wordly."

Eugene Peterson puts it just right when, in *The Message*, he renders verse 27: "Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world."

"... guard against corruption from the godless world." Yes, that's it! To guard against the corruptions of despair and

cynicism and fearfulness and hopeless skepticism that seeps still so deeply into our culture.

In an effort to reinforce what James implores here about “keep[ing] oneself unstained,” (or, as Peterson has it, “guard[ing] against corruption”), allow me to highlight what I call *The Ignatius Imperative*. The Rule of Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, reminds all of the priests in the Jesuit order, and indeed all Christians, *to exhaust all possible positive interpretations of every person, place, thing, deed, or statement, before going negative*. One of the principle ways we can keep ourselves “unstained” and “uncorrupted” by the world is to resist the cynicism that has saturated into far too many facets of our lives. *The Ignatius Imperative* can empower us in that resistance. Such cynicism can be called truly “godless” because it eventually abandons all hope. *The Ignatius Imperative* leads to hope and life.

I have known a special man named James in Kansas City who lived out this principle of James the epistle writer. James Stell was an embodiment of *The Ignatius Imperative*. When he worshiped at Community he’d normally sit by himself in the balcony or at the back to the side at the end of an aisle. He loved his family immensely, proud of his two daughters and sons-in-law, prouder still of his grandchildren. He cared for his wife. He was at peace in his faith. Yes, he had known hardship, and trouble, and sorrow of loss, and the pains of prejudice. Yet, in all of my encounters with James, including when he was battling cancer, I never knew him to complain. Not once. Nor did I ever hear him disparage another person. Not once. He never went negative. James Stell knew *The Ignatius Imperative*. James Stell surely must have read James the epistle writer in his journey in faith.

Conclusion: 10 Suggestions to Start Off the New Year⁹

I’m normally loathe to suggest New Year’s resolutions for myself or anyone else, since most resolutions are so easily dismissed as overly idealistic or too saccharine to be taken seriously. Still, in these uncertain times, and with an ear toward what James has declared in his mail to our time, it does seem useful to share among ourselves those notions that might be helpful. Thus, the following “*Ten Suggestions to Start Off The New Year*”:

1) Trust the regular discipline of prayer to surprise you with new information about yourself and new insights about the life you share within Community’s family of faith. (Countless testimonies reveal that prayer is one of the most soul-widening, mind-expanding, heart-deepening events you can ever experience.)

2) Learn how to handle one new piece of technology this year. (It helps no one to abide as an “electronics dinosaur.” Besides, learning new skills is sheer fun.)

3) Share meals with your loved ones as often as you can. (Eating with others satisfies the soul as well as the stomach.)

4) Carve out some silence for yourself every day. (In a time in history overly saturated with information and a

culture glutted with the ding-dong din of hyper-entertainment, a little peace and quiet can do wonders for your overall disposition and relationships with others.)

5) Acquire at least one new favorite song in the next six months. (The “soundtracks” of our lives are always needing new tunes.)

6) Speak to every child you meet. (What treasurable encounters with genius await anyone who will speak and, more importantly, listen to the children in our midst.)

7) Practice regular worship, weekly at the very least, in and out of town, as one of your personal foundations for living a life of excellence. (Worship is at the heart of what it means to be people of faith, as we express our deepest longings, our highest hopes, our most persistent questions, and our most fervent dreams. The expression of gratitude and the exhilaration of joy, coupled with the shared enjoyment of grace and forgiveness, are essential elements of worship and exemplary human living.)

8) Smile and laugh more. (Smiling and laughing keep the energy vampires away.)

9) Burn the candles, use the nice sheets, buy the premier greeting card. (Don’t save them for the special occasions. Every day is special.)

10) No matter how you feel, wake up, get up, dress up and show up. (You are an important child of God with great graces that only you can share.)

I offer these not as resolutions for a new year but as echoes of what the epistle of James holds for us all regarding the ingredients of a worthy religion.

May these be the elements of a faith of integrity that strengthens the control of our tongues, inspires compassion for the vulnerable, and keeps us moving toward the positive in all aspects of our lives, individually and collectively.

Amen. And again, Happy New Year! I love you and may God bless everyone, everywhere.

NOTES

¹ *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. II* (New York, Abingdon, 1962), p. 795; and William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), pp. 3-4.

² *IDB, Vol. II*, p. 794.

³ Barclay, p. 6.

⁴ Luther’s “epistle of straw” condemnation of James is, by now, common knowledge in the history of the controversies surrounding James. Until very recently Luther’s view has influenced the majority view of James among scholars. See *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume XII* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 177 and M. Eugene Boring’s and Fred B. Craddock’s *The People’s New Testament Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004), p. 714.

⁵ Luther’s attribution of “satanic” authorship comes by way of a lecture by Dr. Jack Forstman at Vanderbilt Divinity School.

⁶ James 2:2-6; see also *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume X* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 377.

⁷ Barclay, p. 69.

⁸ (<http://www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/>)

⁹ The first seven of these suggestions first appeared in my weekly Community column in *Community Church News*, Vol. 67, No. 1, January 2, 2009, p. 2. The last three suggestions are adaptations of a New Year’s greeting e-mailed by a friend.

Communion Invitation by Rev. Melissa St. Clair

It's not all that often that clergy have the opportunity to experience worship without being part of its leadership. I had the privilege, however, this past Friday night to worship with nearly 100 youth from across the Greater Kansas City Region at Tall Oaks for the CYF Mid-Winter Retreat. The Youth Cabinet planned and led the evening's service of worship. Joining the voices of these young people singing with joy, listening to a heartfelt sermon prepared by a high school student who undoubtedly gave up part of his Christmas break to prepare for the message, and experiencing the depth with which the youth understood this table was truly remarkable.

When we gather at this table, we remember the past—the life and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. We encounter God's grace in the present. And we anticipate God's work in the world through the Holy Spirit in the future. As we gather at this table today, may we also remember and celebrate the seeds God has planted in young people in this congregation, in this region, in our country, and in the world. May we rejoice in the ways in which these gifts are being shared among us. And may we anticipate with great joy and hope the future of the church, for it is indeed bright!

All are welcome at this table—young, younger, and youngest. You are welcome here.

Offertory Invitation by Dr. Tom G. Haley

“Make Your light shine, so that others will see the good that you do and will praise God!”

An attractive room is still beautiful in the dark, but no one can see it. By turning on the light, everyone can see the great beauty of the room and will say, “What a beautiful room.” Lighting up a room in this dark world, shows the world the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ.

Talk about lighting up my room let me share with you an experience from last Sunday afternoon. I had just arrived home from church and was hanging up my tie. My two year old Grandson Jack was leaning against a chair and giving me one of those looks that just melt your very being. Then he said, “Lub you gandad.” He's only two so that is just the way he said it, and then to make sure I heard him he said it again. After that whatever he wanted he could have. I picked him up and swung him around in my arms and said, “Jack I love you too.”

What a gift to an old grand father. Life is like this, you never know where the light will come from and what beauty that gift can mean to you. Come today and bring your gifts for you will light up this room and many lives in our community and world.