



## IT'S MORE THAN BEING NICE

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James 2:1-17

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*O LORD, Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.*

James does not suffer fools lightly. Whether or not you're familiar with this book of the Bible, it's fair to say that James' words to us make us squirm. James is direct, he doesn't pull punches, and he is looking at the church with plenty of critiques for how Christians are living out the Good News of Jesus. From his opening chapter he challenges the supposed faith he sees in the church, critical of our speech, our actions and our lackluster community. One commentator on this passage said that in some places in the world, to be Christian means little more than to be nice.<sup>1</sup> But in his book, James doesn't let that rumor go very far—he offers a very specific challenge to any lackluster Christian community. Through pretty direct instruction, James reminds us that it takes more than niceties to faithfully follow Jesus.

Like Cosi said, the book of James is not really a letter written to one congregation; it's more like a sermon or a series of teachings. What we have from James is an honest critique of his own congregation, maybe others around them. James has observed that people in his church are unconsciously catering to the rich and unconsciously looking down their noses at the poor. Furthermore they're directly

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<sup>1</sup> *Texts for Preaching*, Bruggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, and Newsome. WJK, 1993, page 499



ignoring those most in need. Today, in the epistle lesson from the book of James, we are confronted with moral exhortations to live as Christ would have us live.<sup>2</sup>

But despite this honest critique—or perhaps because of it—theologians and biblical scholars have occasionally questioned whether or not James and his words fit within the canon of Scripture. Theologians have interpreted James’ critique as placing works above faith, the actions of our faith over and above the grace God gives us. They say he challenges the Apostle Paul’s theology on grace and salvation. Scholars during the Reformation loved to argue over James words—in a time when reformers were arguing that works cannot save you, James insists that a faith without works is insufficient. Martin Luther was famous for calling James “an epistle of straw,” he himself arguing that it was too weak to be in the Biblical canon. While Luther knew that he couldn’t actually leave James out of his new German translation of the Bible, he did the next best thing: he put it at the very end, behind the index.

But I can’t help but wonder if the debate over James’ theology is due to the fact that folks have been uncomfortable with his words, challenging his theological validity because his challenge makes them uncomfortable. After all Martin Luther himself said, “Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn’t stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing.”<sup>3</sup> Paul himself, as a challenge to the Galatians, said that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control.”<sup>4</sup> It seems all theologians agree that a life of faith in the name of Jesus can’t help but produce works of compassion and justice. A life of Gospel faith produces works that reveal God’s love and justice to the world.

This morning, I want to argue just that: that folks have disagreed over the book of James and his high expectations because they make us uncomfortable. Just ask

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series\\_b\\_james\\_clothes\\_talk\\_money\\_talks.htm](http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_james_clothes_talk_money_talks.htm)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2012/09/the-one-hundred-percent/>

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 5:22-23.



your ministers how much we don't like preaching on this text. James is hard; James makes us squirm. But I think we're missing the point if we ignore or dismiss his argument. James is challenging a church that seems to uphold society's divisions and partiality over and above the ministry of Jesus. James points out our ethical failures. And, we squirm when we know that their critique of our values just may be right on the nose.

I know it seems like I quote Will Willimon a lot, but part of that is because he can be just as forthright and challenging as James. Furthermore, I often quote him because so many of his stories revolve around his time as dean of the chapel at Duke University, regularly interacting with undergrads. And Duke, like many expensive private institutions, deserves to be challenged for its privilege. Willimon says that, in all of his years at Duke, he only had three conversations of any note with a student's parents and that all three were pretty much identical. They all started with him greeting people after a worship service or sitting in his office, when suddenly a well-dressed, white-haired, red-faced man would storm up to him and say, "I hope you're satisfied with yourself. I want you to know that you've ruined my daughter's life. I sent Mary Grace to Duke so that she could get a top-notch education that would set her on the path to becoming a surgeon—a job, by the way, where she would be in a position to help people—and now she's told us that after graduation she wants to join the Peace Corps. Her life is over, and thanks to you I've spent \$200,000 so that she can go spend the next three years of her life in some God-forsaken corner of the world earning nothing."

I love this story because as Dean of the Chapel, Willimon regularly saw how lives were changed when students encountered the ministry of Jesus and the needs of the world. Not that you can't serve God as a doctor, lawyer or CEO; that's not his point. What Willimon witnessed, regularly, was that students entered the high-priced, affluent and fairly privileged culture of Duke University, and through their involvement with nonprofits, campus ministries and mission trips, students found their lives changed. They began to reject the partiality of the world, the favoritism of wealth over poverty, and they discovered a new calling. But this calling never comes without a price, as Willimon met many angry parents over the years.



Friends, our current culture invites a multitude of ways in which we as Christians can reject the values we often see celebrated in our society, and instead celebrate the values of Jesus' ministry—values of inclusion, humility, grace and love. Last August, in the wake of the protests in Charlottesville, VA, I preached two sermons on how both our WORDS and ACTIONS matter as Christians.<sup>5</sup> Because we are God's children, created from God's speech in the beginning, the words we use to articulate our faith matter. But so do our actions—those movements of our lives in which our faith is actually lived out in the world. And in both of those sermons, I quoted the book of James. After those sermons, one of our members came to me and said yes words and actions matter, but what about faith? And he's right ... faith is at the root of it all. Our words and actions depend upon the lived faith we have in God's story. Because of that, I'm going to share the same story I told last summer.

Over a year ago, while in Israel, I had the privilege of visiting Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, in Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> When I visited this museum last year, it was not the first time I walked through Holocaust stories of painful remembrance. But it was the first time I traveled to such a place with individuals of color. Our group was made up of African-American men, white men and women, and one Native American man. We spent several hours walking through the museum, reading the stories and listening to the first-hand accounts, and later that day we had the chance to process the journey with each other.

One African-American man in our group, a part-time pastor in rural North Carolina, was quiet during a lot of our reflection, until finally sharing a personal story. He grew up in a small town of North Carolina in the midst of racial segregation. Throughout his childhood, despite segregation laws, there was one general store that served him and his fellow African-Americans. In the 1960s, they were able to shop there whenever they wanted and were never treated differently based on the color of their skin. They were even allowed to carry lines of credit by

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<sup>5</sup> Words Matter: <https://www.brickchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/transcripts/pdfs/0820201747196.pdf>

Actions Matter: <https://www.brickchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/transcripts/pdfs/0827201750960.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.yadvashem.org/about/yad-vashem>



the store owner. As a child, my friend didn't think much about it, but walking through Yad Vashem that day he remembered this exception.

At the museum, my friend came across the family name of that store owner in the lists of remembrance, realizing that the kind owners of that general store were Jewish. In that small southern town in North Carolina, one Jewish family refused to abide by segregation. And as my friend read the stories in Yad Vashem that day, he began to understand why. The story of his childhood in the segregated South and the stories of those families in the Holocaust were connected. He remembered that racially divided small town in North Carolina, but by contrast he also remembered that family and their store. The faith of that one Jewish family, their rejection of the law of the land and of the wider culture around them, shaped this pastor's understanding of what it means to be a faithful witness.

Rather than run from James' words today, or critique them as theologically inaccurate, why not hear his challenge? Here we are, many of us back from summer schedules and vacation, with a fresh fall of ministry ahead of us. We're also a church going through a lot of change and transition. Additionally, we face a currently divisive and destructive culture in which faith and integrity are in demand. I think we're actually ripe to hear James' challenge. So rather than squirm, we should listen to his critique: what does set our Christian community apart from the values of the world? If Jesus' ministry was one that included all, do we reflect that kind of welcome? How does our church life and mission differ from a country club of like-minded people? Or are we guilty of the kind of favoritism and partiality that James critiques?

All Christians should wrestle with these questions. And as we here do so, this fall presents us with ways in which we can grow our faith and witness, further challenging the divisive culture around us. Rather than dismiss his critique, James invites to allow our faith breathe into our daily lives. Join one of our Bible studies here or help teach scripture to our children and youth. Do it, not to add another task to your busy schedule, but because you want to hear God's voice and glean wisdom for daily living. Or use your hands to prepare a meal at Jan Hus on Tuesdays or here in the Wednesday night dinner program. Join the prison ministry and write letters or help recently incarcerated people make a fresh start. Do it, not



to make yourself busier, but so that you can spend time with folks who feel excluded by much of the wealth and favoritism in this city. Another opportunity might be to pray and knit with the women in the prayer shawl ministry as they care for those who are grieving. Or visit some of our elderly members or rock a baby in the nursery. Finally, challenge James by serving as a greeter or usher on Sunday morning, dispelling his critique that we're only about favoritism and partiality. Welcome unfamiliar faces into this congregation, get to know them, help them find a seat, and make sure they feel included. And if you visit another community of faith and are inspired by their witness and practice, share that insight with our community. We all have a call to be more than just nice to each other—James won't let us ignore it—we have a call to live lives that reflect the compassion and love of the God who created us.

This morning, James points out that we have the choice between our faith and favoritism. And we have been called to choose faith. Don't be that Christian that James is talking about who gives preference to the person with gold rings and fine clothes. Don't be that Christian that James is talking about who sees a neighbor in need and does nothing. James is challenging each of us to make Jesus' ministry an active, breathing reality in our daily lives. Minister in the name of Jesus. Friends, faith, without works, is dead. We are called to do more, to be more...and the world needs it.

*Amen.*