

**Message Delivered at Christ Church
Saturday & Sunday, August 29th & 30th, 2009**

TEXT: James 1:17-27

Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

I want to do some teaching this morning on the Letter of James...do a little Bible together.

We don't read from James very often. It's one of those "back of the Bible" letters that's overshadowed by the bigger writings earlier in the New Testament. It's had a speckled history in the life of the Church. It had a hard time making it into the Bible, and a hard time staying in the Bible. Martin Luther wanted to get rid of it because he thought it was opposed to the belief that we are made right with God through the grace of God.

But the letter made it in; and Luther failed at removing it; and so here it is, for us to read from this evening and seek guidance from.

The James we think wrote this letter is the James who was the brother of Jesus. That James also has the nickname "James the Just," though "James the Wise" might have been more accurate.

As the story goes, James was eventually martyred. But before he was martyred, he had a distinguished ministry as the leader of the Jerusalem Church. In fact, some people refer to him as the first Bishop of Jerusalem. His story is told in Acts, particularly Acts 15 which tells of how the Church dealt with its first great argument. The argument was over the place of the Gentiles in the Church, so they brought everybody together and held a council. And it was James who chaired the Council, managed the process, and found a way forward. He was a present leader, whose spirit was tempered by the nitty-gritty of life. His story reveals a man who knew how to be patient; who knew how to be quiet and listen; who knew how and when to be decisive; and who saw answers to problems that no one else saw.

You ever met someone who is down to earth and practical and gentle and wise all at the same time, with a lot of common sense? That's the kind of guy James was.

And it's the kind of letter he wrote. The Letter of James is probably the most practical writing in all the New Testament. It revolves around a basic kind of question that all of us ask: "How can we live faithfully?" "How can we live well, and how can we live the way God would have us live...where we are?" Or, to put it another way, "How, even, can we be wise?"

Now Wisdom is an old-fashioned word and an old-fashioned concept. There are lots of different definitions of wisdom, but I'll offer today that wisdom is the way of living rightly. It seems to be learned in surprising places, and usually take a while to grow. Those who have been graced by it also often have a few battle scars to prove it.

To be wise is to possess and live according to a proper understanding of God, ourselves, and the life we live. There is about the wise a gentleness and quietude; a depth and steadfastness; a confidence and trust; a generosity and humility; and also a strength and integrity, because at least for me, none of the wise persons I've ever known are pushovers. And as Eugene Peterson says, wisdom is more than knowledge of the truth. It is, he writes, "skill in living." "For what good is a truth," he asks, "if we don't know how to live it?"

Well, James is a practical writing intended to teach Christ-like wisdom. It's not filled with reasoned intellectual arguments, or subtle theological reflections or insights. It just kind of

lays it out there, and tells us why. I fancy the Book of James as being a pastoral letter from a wise bishop to a bunch of new Christians who had asked him, “Okay, now...how do I do it? I got this thing called ‘faith.’ Now, how do I live it?”

So he writes them back, and says “Here’s how. Here’s some wisdom on living the fullness of life God promises us...”

First, try this: Listen...try listening, to God and to others. “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” There’s a grace that comes from above, so give yourself the chance to listen for it.

A long time ago in the time of sailing ships, there was a custom in the British navy when a particularly bad storm would hit. It was called “the still.” The whistle would blow calling for a “still” in the middle of the storm, and for a moment the crew would stop and be silent so they could hear the instructions, and get focused, and be present to what matters most. And what James is teaching his people is that every once in a while we need to get quiet, and still so that we can listen.

Now, this ain’t rocket science, everybody. He’s just saying what momma always said...that if we’re talking, we ain’t listening; and if we’re listening, we probably aren’t learning, either. And if we’re talking when we’re angry...well, there’s a good chance we’ll end up saying something we’ll later wish we hadn’t.

James is stating a proverbial truth: The tongue is a thermometer, but it’s also a thermostat. How we use it reveals our spiritual temperature, and how we use it determines our spiritual temperature. That’s why from the beginning, and throughout history, the great spiritual guides—including James—have always maintained that keeping intentional silence is a way both to invite God in and temper the unruly parts of our spirit. Silence brings peace, and order, and attentiveness. For a little bit we stop talking, and here’s what we discover: we give God the chance to have the first word; we’ve said fewer things we regret; our emotions are eventually brought back in order; and that the intentional silence leaks into other parts of our lives so that when we speak we are more likely to end up speaking in the right way and the right time.

So maybe, James teachers, focus more on listening, and less on talking or your own emotional upheaval. How that looks for each of us will be different, but it may mean that maybe we start the day and end the day with a few minutes of intentional silence and listening; or we turn the radio off in the car; or when we find ourselves talking about someone who’s not in the room, we stop; or find ourselves beginning a sentence “I really shouldn’t say this,” we don’t.

Then, James says, you may want to try this: try dumping the bad stuff to make room for the good stuff. His language is “remove the rank growth of wickedness” so that the true word can be implanted in us.

Here’s a thought on what he means, and again, it ain’t rocket science: before you paint, you got to chip away the old stuff or the new stuff won’t stick; before sowing the seeds in the garden, it’s a good idea to get rid of the weeds. Or to put it one other way, if we want to listen really well, one step is to be quiet. Another step that helps is to clean the wax out of our ears.

It’s like this: There’s a guy named Brian MacLaren who has written this little book called Finding Our Way Again. In it, he talks about a way station on the ancient path of faith that Western Christianity called the Via Purgativa...the way of purging...and what Eastern Christianity called Katharsis. He says “imagine you’ve been given an old cabin in the woods. But you go there, and the place is a mess...there’s trash, and dirt, and all sorts of nasty stuff. It’s a beautiful cabin, it’s just that it needs some attention, and it needs to be spruced up and made

into a home. Well, the first thing you do is clean it out. The first thing is to get rid of some stuff.”

That’s what James talks about. Get rid of some stuff. Stop holding onto it. Give it over. Let it be purged. If we can’t figure out where to put it, give it to God. Hand it over. Clean it out, so that we can make room for the word that saves. Hand over all those things Jesus talks about in this reading today. Hand over the sin, and the shame, and the guilt, and all those memories and the voices that cause us to believe God would never love us; get rid of all that sordid and rank baggage—that junk--that leaves us feeling unvalued; that causes us to doubt that God would really love us. Because all those memories, and voices, and feelings, and darkness...all those things are the devil’s work, who would like nothing more than for us to stay cluttered. Well, Jesus is our gardener, and he’s glad to take up the weeds so that the true word may be implanted in our souls.

And then, James tells his congregations, you may want to find some way to do something sometime. I mean, it’s one thing to listen. That’s important. And to listen, we got to be quiet in our lips and hearts. And it’s one thing to clear out the baggage so that the way of Christ can find a home in our souls. But really, at some point, trust in God becomes internalized when we test it in our lives; and do something with it; and give it a shot. That’s how it moves from being a part of who we are, to being the source of who we are.

You see, that’s what those readers of this letter really want to know about from James...how can the full effect of Christ, and faith, and love, and mercy be known in my life. How can it just take me over? How can it be fully released this day? Well, he teaches them, do it enough, and that’s exactly what happens.

You see, Luther was wrong here. (Now who am I to say that Luther was “wrong,” but there you have it...) James isn’t saying you earn your way to heaven by working hard. James was saying that the way the love of God becomes real in our life is by living it, in a real and tangible manner. If all we ever do is hear it, he says, we’re like the image in the mirror. It isn’t real, and eventually will vanish, and the memory of the image fades. There’s no permanence there. But do it—embody faith, the best way we know how—and it’s not an image anymore. It’s real.

Now in his letter, James gives them all sorts of suggestions on how to do this: watch your tongue; watch your temper; care for the vulnerable, like the orphans and widows; don’t show favoritism; be generous; don’t cheat people, especially your workers; be just; don’t argue so much. For the readers of his letter, those are all sorts of different ways to try doing it. We may find that those actions works for us, as well...or maybe it’s something different.

But we seek some way, and some place, to live it out. Because it’s one of the ways our trust in God grows. If we learn how to live the way God would have us live first through listening, and then through making a space to receive the word, the way it becomes part of our lives is by doing it.

That’s what James teaches those baby Christians he loves. That’s one path, he suggests, that may lead us to Wisdom.

So...listening up; cleaning up; give it a shot. Sounds like James has given us a plan... That’s a great place to end a sermon.

But I got one more thing to say and it has to do with the way James wrote his letter...

There’s something interesting about the structure of the Letter of James. It’s rather circular. You know, Paul’s letters tend to be pretty linear and well-ordered. James is a little bit more like a NASCAR race, going around in circles and touching on the same thing more than

once. It's almost formless. This isn't the last time he'll talk about watching our tongue; won't be the last time he'll talk about caring for widows and orphans; won't be the last time he'll talk about doing our faith. The style of his letter is to keep coming back, and keep coming back, and keep coming back...to the same points.

I think that's intentional; and I think it's intentional because that's the way the life of faith is... It's not something we finish. It's something we stay at. We don't listen only once, or clear the decks only once, and certainly we don't always act on our faith only once. We keep going back because we're never done, and there is always something new God wants to reveal to us. We keep at it, and persevere, with the assurance God blesses us in our doing. That's what the wise—which is what we seek to be—that's what the wise know; and it's what James knew, also.