



"Harvest of Righteousness"

a sermon by

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Our Scripture for this afternoon comes to us from the book of James 3:13-4:10 and continues in James' convicting, instructional style that we're challenged to hang with in order to hear the word of grace. But it is in there.

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, “God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.” Here ends our reading. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

While studying our text for today I couldn't help but think that our author James would have been great friends with that fiery protestant preacher Jonathan Edwards, who was known for whipping his congregation into a frenzy of conviction and fear, motivating repentance through such sermons as, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Or perhaps that he would have connected pretty well with one of the founding fathers of the Reformation, John Calvin, whose first of five fundamentals about the Christian life in relation to God was the notion of our total depravity. With the onset of fall I tend to be reminded of the influence of the beloved puritans on our Christian life and culture, enforcing the rule of law when it came to social codes and morals with an iron fist that often clenched the Bible as it reigned swift and public justice down upon the heads of sinners in a way that affects us still today. And all in the name of sowing God's righteousness and harvesting souls. While it does take up space in my own life, there is really no room for a healthy guilt complex anywhere in Christian theology- but conviction does have its place. And so in a way, the comparison of James' writings to those of the great preacher Edwards who was hell bent on converting souls, or likening his work to the attorney turned pastor Calvin whose argument for expressing the magnitude of God's love required first the premise of our own radical sinfulness is not so inappropriate. Because through his own means of persuasion James too is building the case for our repentance and conversion, in order that we might fully understand the power and love of God.

He starts, of course, with the premise of sin. More specifically, with the problems intrinsic to being in this world and yet not of it. James takes very seriously that the complexity of that

space coupled with the vulnerability of human nature to a contagious drive to satisfy its own cravings and desires leads to what Aristotle would call the sickness of vice or, plainly, sin. James does not mince words or tread lightly through the issue, calling out the ‘bitter envy’ and ‘selfish ambition’ that we are so prone too as ‘devilish, unspiritual, and earthly.’ Certainly things that are not of God but that rather run contrary to God’s affinity for creative order and goodness and that can, in fact, wreak havoc on the spiritual life with dire consequences not only for the individual, but the community as well. In a society that equates personal value with personal possessions, is it any wonder that envy toward those who have what you want should flourish and then give rise to arrogance, which insists that you should have that desired item or position or person anyway no matter the cost. James is no fool. “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? (He asks) Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.” You would think that in one of the most prosperous countries in the world we would be able to let go of the feeling that we are dealing with a scarcity of resources and so therefore must hoard as much of everything as possible for ourselves, but no. We are instead what James would call adulterers, double-minded, saying we wish to be wed to God’s ways while continuing to chase after our own.

But rather than attack our propensity for vice, James goes to the source to unpack the issue and encourages us to do the same. “You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures...But (God) gives all the more grace.” Whereas it is far easier for one to try to persuade a sinner to repent by simply striking the fear of God or Sheol into their hearts, to his credit James never separates the illegitimate sin from the legitimate desire behind it and so begins to uproot our sin by helping us to understand it in a way that does not lead to debilitating shame, but instead to the honest confession of our need. For James, the problem does not lay in our desire, for the desire behind the sin represents the deep longing of our hearts for wisdom and love, belonging and acceptance, happiness, security, life, and peace. No, the problem is not in the desire itself, but rather in where we turn to fill that desire. The problem is in the way that we tend to seek out for ourselves and at great cost those things that God would very much like to give us for free. The problem is in our belief that our desires can be fulfilled by indulging them, instead of acknowledging God as the giver of all good gifts who alone is able to enrich life or to destroy. It is a question of spiritual allegiance, really. One that asks to whom or what will we give true power over our lives? To whom or what will we turn to fulfill the deepest desires of our hearts that will always be there? In humble recognition of our own inability to do for ourselves, will we seek the source of true life, or will we continue to fumble blindly through our sin, searching everywhere for fulfillment but the arms of God?

Rev. Michael Yaconelli, author of the book, “Messy Spirituality” writes, “I feel like I am the only klutz in the kingdom of God...When I compare my life with the experts’, I feel sloppy, unkempt, and messy in the midst of immaculately dressed saints ... (we have been) led to believe that the ‘mess’ of our lives disqualifies us from the possibility of an authentic spiritual life.”¹ Warfield M. Firor, a former surgeon at Johns Hopkins once wrote that, “Remorse is the scrutiny

¹Michael Yaconelli, Messy Spirituality, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002.

of one's errors without hope. Repentance is the scrutiny of those same mistakes with hope."² One of the great blessings of the Christian faith, and at the heart of James' argument, is the belief that we have the capacity, through repentance, to be renewed. That an authentic spiritual life is made available to us not in spite of the ways we stumble on our journey through the kingdom of God, but because of them. One of the great misconceptions of our faith is that once we are converted to belief in Jesus Christ that our problems will go away. That the ambiguities in our lives caused by those deepest desires of our hearts that are longing for fulfillment will go away. But they won't. But rather than being condemned by this reality, we are being invited to be transformed by it. We are being invited to think about repentance and conversion not just in terms of a singular event in our lives, but as part of an ongoing work that takes place over thousands of moments in our lives whenever we are challenged to refine our aptitude in turning to God instead of ourselves. Whenever we are being challenged to surrender to God the very spirit within us that he yearns for rather than trying to fill it with all those things that will never satisfy.

The struggle for who we will allow to be lord of our desires will continue until the end of our days. Just as we are bound to stumble along this wayward path of faith that will never be perfected as long as our spirits reside in these flesh and bones. But the promise stands sure that when you have all the more need, "He gives (you) all the more grace...(therefore) submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands...and purify your hearts...humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you." Theologian Eugene Peterson writes, "All the persons of faith I know are sinners, doubters, uneven performers. We are secure not because we are sure of ourselves but because we trust that God is sure of us."³ We must pray continually for the wisdom from above to rest assured in the promises of God. Who refuses to give up on us but gladly receives the constant turning of our hearts towards him. Who offers a harvest of righteousness in our lives if we can find the courage and the strength to sow in God's peace. Who promises to draw near if we will only do the same. Amen.

² Burton Scott Easton, The Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol. 12, New York, Abingdon, 1957, p.49-58.

³ Eugene Peterson, A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society, Madison, Inter Varsity Press, 2000.