July 24

This week we will continue our look at the books of the Bible in order with the book of James.

This book was written by Jesus' brother James in about 49 AD, so a relatively brief time following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. James is mentioned as Jesus' brother in the gospels of Matthew and Mark: “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?” (Matthew 13:55). He is also mentioned as Jesus’ brother by the Roman historian Josephus in his seminal work *Antiquities of the Jews*.

The fact that he is mentioned first among Jesus’ brothers in the gospel accounts suggests that he was the oldest among Jesus’ brothers, though of course, Jesus was the oldest among all the siblings.

Interestingly, Jesus chose none of his brothers as his disciples. That being said, one cannot help but wonder what it was like growing up in the same family as Jesus, especially when Jesus began His ministry. Certainly, the teachings of Jesus had a profound influence on James, since he was an eyewitness to the life and ministry of Jesus, and no doubt this influence permeated his writing. So, let’s take a look.

This book takes the form of a letter that is directed to “the twelve tribes [of Israel] scattered among the nations” (1:1). And then he says this:

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (1:2-4).

I have to believe that as Jesus’ brother, James is speaking here from personal experience. As Jesus faced mounting persecution, no doubt so did the members of His family. And yet, as dedicated families do, they hung in there and “persevered.” I personally have often found that perseverance, or what my dad would have called “stick-to-it-iveness” is an important component of the Christian walk. James advises that as followers of Jesus, perseverance in life’s difficulties will produce “maturity and completeness” and therefore we should approach our trials with “pure joy.”

Of course, that’s very often easier said than done. As I ponder all this, and why James opens his letter with this advice, I think that perhaps he might have taken his cue from his Big Brother, who persevered on to the cross, into the tomb, and ultimately, up to His Father. And He did so with “pure joy,” knowing that he was providing the Way, and the only Way, for you and me.

IHS, Pastor Lou
July 25

Grace and peace to you this day.

I have to say, the book of James is one of my favorite books in all of Scripture. In many ways, it sets forth a roadmap of practical advice of what the Christian life should look like in down-to-earth human terms. Consider the following:

- “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry…” (1:19).

- “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (1:22).

- “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless” (1:26).

- “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (1:27).

So, let me ask a question: What if we actually did these things? Let’s take the first one. What if we were actually quick to listen and slow to speak, instead of the other way around. We’ve all seen those You Tube videos where Trump supporters are shouting at Biden supporters, and vice versa. Pro life supporters are shouting at pro choice supporters, and vice versa. The confrontations are often hateful, ugly, and at times violent. In the midst of it all, no one is listening.

Don’t get me wrong. It’s important to stand up for our beliefs and for what is right. But listening is not necessarily agreeing. Rather, it is affirmation, if nothing else, of the other person’s humanity. It is recognition that the other person, just like us, is the “handiwork” of the Almighty.

So for my part, next time I’m tempted to argue with someone with whom I disagree, I’ll try my best to listen to the advice given to me by Jesus’ brother James, and put a “tight rein on [my] tongue.”

IHS,
Pastor Lou
July 26

Grace and peace to you this day.

I’m going to depart a bit from my usual practice and simply provide you with one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture. It’s thirteen verses long, and needs no commentary from me, other than to say it helps define me as a Christian man and as a pastor. So here you go, from Jesus’ brother James:

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (2:14-26).

IHS,

Pastor Lou
July 27

As we finish our brief look at the book of James, I will return to one of my first comments earlier in the week and wonder what it must have been like to be the brother of Jesus. Did they argue? Was there sibling rivalry? Did they vie for their parents’ attention? Did Joseph have to come into their bedroom at night and tell them to be quiet and go to sleep?

To be sure, James would have witnessed all the insults, and the accusations, and the abuse that was directed at his big brother. He had to have been hurt by it. I wonder if he ever tried to console Jesus, and I wonder of Jesus would have said, “James, it’s going to be ok. Trust me.”

Maybe that’s why so much of the book of James is about the hurtful nature of human speech, and the Christian call to turn that tendency around into a reflection of the mercy and grace we receive from the Father. This is how James describes it:

“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and saltwater flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water” (3:9-12).

James is saying that we can’t have it both ways. We can’t praise the Father and with the same mouth curse those He has created by His own hand. Once again, we see that God is not interested in our false piety. Praising Him while cursing His people causes our praise to ring hollow in His ears.

So the next time you’re in traffic, or in the grocery line behind someone with a credit card that’s not working (and in both these instances I speak from personal experience… just sayin’), let’s remember what we’re told by someone who knew Jesus and what He taught better than anyone.

IHS,

Pastor Lou
July 28

Grace and peace to you this day.

Here’s your musical devotion for the week. Turn up the volume and enjoy.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UsH9EjaoXM

IHS,

Pastor Lou