

["TWO THINGS THERE ARE WHICH PART MEN FROM THE GOSPEL: ONE IS ANGRY IMPATIENCE, AND THE OTHER EVIL LUST. OF THESE JAMES SPEAKS IN THIS EPISTLE."] (LUTHER)

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Easter; James 1:16-21

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1. This lesson was addressed to all Christians. Particularly was it meant for the time when they had to endure from the unbelieving world persecutions severe and oft; as James indicates at the outset, where he says (verses 2-4): "Count it all joy, my brethren, when ye fall into manifold temptations; knowing that the proving of your faith worketh patience. And let patience have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire." Again (verse 12): "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation."

WHY MEN REJECT THE GOSPEL.

2. Two things there are which part men from the Gospel: one is angry impatience, and the other evil lust. Of these James speaks in this epistle. The former sin, he says, arises under persecution--when for the sake of Christ the Lord you must give up property and honour, and risk body and life; must be regarded as fools, as the drudges, yes, the footstool, of the world. Painful and intolerable to the point of discouragement and weariness is such a lot, particularly when it is apparent that your persecutors enjoy good fortune, having honour, power and wealth, while you suffer constantly. Peter, too, admonishes (I Pet 3, 10), upon authority of Psalm 34, 12-14: He who would be a Christian must be prepared to avoid evil and do good, to seek peace, to refrain his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile, and must commit himself to God. In the case of a great many people otherwise favourably disposed toward the Gospel, it is nothing but persecution which deters and repels them from it. They cannot endure the injuries and reproaches they must suffer for its sake. But for the precious holy cross which is laid upon Christians, and their inability to overcome indignation and impatience, the world would long ago have been crowded with Christians. But on account of trials men recoil, saying: "Rather than endure these, I will remain with the majority; as it is with them, so be it with me."

3. The second thing to which James refers is worldly lust---"filthiness," as James terms it. This, too, is a prevailing evil, particularly with the common people. When they once hear the Gospel they are prone to think right away that they know all about it. They cease to heed it and drown in lust, pride and covetousness of the world, being concerned entirely with accumulating wealth and seeking pleasure.

4. That these two evils prevail is apparent to the eyes of all men today. We fear that we shall fare no better than the prophets and the apostles; these things are likely to continue. Nevertheless, we must unceasingly exert ourselves in behalf of ourselves and others to guard diligently against both these evils. Particularly must we not impatiently murmur and rage against God; we must also show meekness toward our fellowmen, to the end that wrath everywhere may be quelled and subdued, and only patience and meekness reign among Christians.

5. As I said before, such seems to be the trend of the whole text. The apostle gives a reason why we should be patient to the extent of not allowing ourselves to be vexed with them who injure us, especially ungrateful rejecters of the Word of God or persecutors of Christians. The reason he assigns is the debt of gratitude we owe: we are to remember the great good we receive from God in heaven--"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights."

OUR BLESSINGS OUTWEIGH OUR ILLS.

6. If you carefully balance our gifts and trials against each other and weigh them carefully, you will find the blessings conferred upon you so numerous and rich as far to outweigh the injuries and reproaches you must incur. Therefore, if you are assailed by the world, and are provoked to impatience by ingratitude, contempt and persecution, compare with your trials the blessings and consolations you have in Christ and his Gospel. You will soon find you have more reason to pity your enemies than you have to murmur and to rage against them.

7. Again, concerning them who live in worldly lusts--in "filthiness," as the apostle terms it: let not their conduct induce you to forsake the Gospel to be like them; for their portion is altogether paltry in comparison with your glorious blessings and divine riches. Take thought, then, and do not allow yourselves to be misled either by the wanton wickedness of the world, through the injury and pain it may inflict, or by the prosperity of the world's wealthy, who live riotously in all manner of voluptuousness. Look upon what you have from the Father in comparison--his divine blessings, his perfect gifts.

8. For the sake of distinction, we shall designate by "good gifts" the blessings we enjoy here in this life; by "perfect gifts" those awaiting us in the life to come. James implies this distinction when he says: "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures." In the terms "good gifts" and "perfect gifts," the apostle comprehends all our blessings, those we have already received in the present life and those to be ours in the life to come.

9. I will not now speak particularly of earthly, transient and changeable blessings, such as temporal goods, honour, a healthy body and others, but could we only compare our blessings with these and weigh our treasures and surpassing blessings, we should presently conclude that ours transcend in value a hundred thousand times anything the world possesses and boasts. Many individuals there are who would give thousands of dollars to have the sight of both eyes. So much do they prize the blessing of sight, they would willingly suffer a year's illness or endure other great inconveniences to obtain it. Less sensible would they be to such discomforts than to the deprivation of the thing they desire. Of physical blessings particularly, we shall not now speak, however, save to mention that they are never equalled by physical ills. Who can purchase or merit, even by enduring tenfold his present physical ills, the very least of God's gifts; as, for instance, the beholding of the light of the beautiful sun for a single day? And so long as mortal life itself remains, you have the greatest of blessings, one outweighing far all gold and silver and all the misfortunes you may endure.

OUR BLESSINGS IN CHRIST'S RESURRECTION.

But we shall speak now particularly of the blessings we have in Christ's resurrection, a subject appropriate to this Paschal season. The text says, Every good gift and every perfect gift cometh down from the Father of lights. For God has begun the work of edifying us, of building us up, and will constitute us his own children, his heirs. This work, James says, is wrought through the Gospel, or "the word of truth," as he terms it.

10. But what does the resurrection advantage us? It has already brought us this gain: our hearts are enlightened and filled with joy, and we have passed from the darkness of sin, error and fear into the clear light; the Christian is able to judge all sects, all doctrines of devils, that may arise on earth. Is it not a thing of unspeakable value, a precious gift, to be enlightened and taught of God to the extent of being able to judge correctly every doctrine and every kind of conduct exhibited in this world, and to show all men how to live--what to do and what to avoid? Well may we boast, then, of having here on earth also a Father--"the Father of lights"--from whom we receive blessings of such magnitude that man should willingly yield body and life for their attainment.

What would I in my darkness not have given to be liberated from the very dread which prompted the celebration of masses and other abominations, yes, from the torture and anguish of conscience which left me no rest? or to have instruction enabling me rightly to interpret a single psalm? I would, for such enlightenment, readily have crawled on the ground to the ends of the earth. Thank God, we now have the blessed treasure abundantly, the great and precious light, the gracious Word. What is the sum of all suffering and misfortune compared to this

light?

11. Secondly, through Christ's resurrection we have a good, joyous conscience, one able to withstand every form of sin and temptation and to maintain a sure hope of eternal life. The great, glorious gifts and blessings of the resurrection are these: the Gospel, Holy Baptism, the power of the Holy Spirit, and comfort in all adversity. What is a slight injury or the loss of some temporal blessing in comparison with these? What reason has any man to murmur and to rage when such divine blessings are his, even here in this life, blessings which none can take away or abridge? If, then, you are called to renounce money, possessions, honour and men's favour, remember you have a treasure more precious than all the honours and all the possessions of the world. Again, when you see one living in great splendour, in pleasure and presumption, following his own inclinations, think thus: "What has he? A wretched portion, a beggarly morsel. In contrast, I have divine grace enabling me to know God's will and the work he would have me do, and all in heaven and on earth is mine." Look, says James, upon the treasure already obtained from the Father of lights--his great and glorious gifts.

12. But these do not represent the consummation of resurrection blessings. We must yet await the real, the perfect, gifts. Our earthly condition does not admit of perfection; hence we cannot truly perceive, cannot comprehend, our treasure. We are but "a kind of first-fruits of his creatures." God has only commenced to work in us, but he will not leave us in that state. If we continue in faith, not allowing ourselves to be turned away through wrath and impatience, God will bring us to the real, eternal blessings, called "perfect gifts," the possession of which excludes error, stumbling, anger, and any sin whatever.

THE FUTURE LIFE OF BLESSEDNESS.

13. That future existence, James goes on to say, will be one wherein is "no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning"--no alternating of light and darkness. In other words, there will not be the variation and instability characteristic of this world, even of the Christian life--today joyous, tomorrow sad; now standing but soon tottering. It is in the Christian life just as in the physical world: we find variableness and continual change--light is succeeded by darkness, day by night, cold by heat; here are mountains, there valleys; today we are well, tomorrow ill; and so it goes. But all this change shall be abolished. The present life shall be succeeded by one wherein is no variation, but a permanence and eternity of blessing. We shall unceasingly behold God in his majesty where dwells no darkness, no death, plague nor infirmity, but pure light, joy and happiness. Look to this future life! call it to mind, when assailed by the world and enticed to anger or evil lust. Remember the great blessings of heaven assuredly promised you, and whereof Christ your Head has already taken possession, that he may make sure your entrance into the same blessings. These should be to you far more precious and desirable than the things of earth, which all men must leave behind.

14. To these things the Christian should direct his thoughts and efforts, that he may learn to prize his blessings, to recognize his treasures as great and glorious, and to thank God for the beginnings of his grace and blessing bestowed here below. Let us ever look and turn toward true knowledge and understanding, toward righteousness and life; so shall we attain that perfection wherein we are freed from the present imperfect, unstable existence, the yoke we now bear upon our necks and which continually weighs upon us and renders us liable to fall from the Gospel. Impulse and aid for such pursuit we are to receive from the holy cross and persecution, as well as from the example of the world. With what ease the poor, wretched people are wrested from the Word and from faith, wherein they might enjoy unspeakable grace and blessings, by the sordid, beggarly pleasures to be sought for here!

15. Therefore, James says: "Why trouble yourselves about earthly blessings, which though God-given are transitory? Why not much rather rejoice in the comforting prospect of the great heavenly blessings already abundantly yours and which cannot be taken from you?" And by way of explanation he says further: "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth."

GOD'S CHILDREN BEGOTTEN BY THE WORD.

16. The first, and in fact the best, thing Christ has sent us from on high is Sonship. He brought us forth, made us his children, or heirs. We are truly called children born of God. But how are we born? Through "the Word of truth," or the true Word. By this statement James makes a wide thrust at all factions and sects. For they also have a word and boast much of their doctrine, but theirs is not the Word of truth whereby men are made children of God. They teach naught, and know naught, about how we are to be born God's children through faith. They prate much about the works done by us in the state derived from Adam. But we have a Word whereby, as we are assured, God makes us his beloved children and justifies us--if we believe in that Word. He justifies us not through works or laws. The Christian must derive his Sonship from his birth. All whittling and patching is to no purpose. The disciples of Moses, and all work-mongers, would effect it by commandments, extorting a work here and a work there, effecting nothing. New beings are needed, children of God by birth, as John 1, 12 says.

17. The children of God, John tells us, are they who believe on the name of Christ; that is, who sincerely cling to the Word. John extols the Word as the great, the mighty, gift. They are children who cleave to the message that through Christ God forgives their sins and receives them into his favour; who adhere to this promise in all temptations, afflictions and troubles. The Word here on earth is the jewel which secures Sonship. Now, since God has so greatly blessed you as to make you his own begotten children, shall he not also give you every other good?

18. Whence, then, do you derive Sonship? Not from your own will, not from your own powers or efforts. Were it so, I and other monks surely should have obtained it, independently of the Word; it would have been ours through the numerous works we performed in our monastic life. It is, secured, James says, "of his will." For it never entered into the thought of any man that so should we be made children of God. The idea did not grow in our gardens; it did not spring up in our wells. But it came down from above, "from the Father of lights," by Word and Spirit revealed to us and given into our hearts through the agency of his apostles and their successors, by whom the Word has been transmitted to us. Hence we did not secure it through our efforts or merits. Of his Fatherly will and good pleasure was it conferred upon us; of pure grace and mercy he give it.

CHRISTIANS THE FIRST-FRUITS.

19. James says, "That we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures"; that is, the newly- begun creature, or work, of God. By this phrase the apostle distinguishes the creatures of God from the creatures of the world, or creatures of men. Likewise does Peter when he says (1 Pet 2, 13), "Be subject to every ordinance [or creature] of man"; that is, to everything commanded, ordained, instituted, made, by men. For instance, a prince constitutes men tax-gatherers, squires, secretaries, or anything he desires, within the limits of his power. But new creatures are found with God. They are styled "creatures of God" because he has created them as his own work, independently of human effort or human power. And so the Christian is called a "new creature of God," a creature God himself has made, aside from all other creatures and higher than they. At the same time, such creation of God is only in its initial stage. He still daily operates upon it until it becomes perfect, a wholly divine creature, as the very sun in clearness and purity, without sin and imperfection, all aglow with love divine.

20. Take into careful consideration these facts. Keep before you the great blessing, honour and glory God has conferred upon you in making you heirs of the life to come, the life wherein shall be no imperfection nor variation, the life which shall be an existence in divine purity and protection like God's own. Do not, then, by any means allow yourselves to be provoked to anger by the wretched, sordid, beggar's wallet which the world craves. Rather, much rather, rejoice in the divine blessings, and thank God for having made you worthy of them. Whether sweet or bitter--in comparison with these let everything else be spurned. "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us-ward"--to us the children of God--says Paul in Romans 8,18.

IMPATIENT ANGER FORBIDDEN.

21. So James draws the conclusion: "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath." In other words, in receiving counsel or comfort be swift; but do not permit yourselves readily to criticize, curse, or

upbraid God or men. James does not mean to prohibit reproof, censure, indignation and correction where the command of God or necessity requires; but he forbids rashness or hastiness on our part, despite our provocation in the premises. When we are provoked we should first hear what the Word of God says and be advised thereby. It is the right and true counsel, and we should ever permit ourselves to be led by it; according to its teaching should all our decisions, reproofs and censures be regulated. In immediate connection, James bids us receive the Word with meekness; we are not to be incensed when censured by its authority, or to become impatient and murmur when we have to suffer something because of it. The reason James assigns for restraining our anger is: "For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." This is a truth admitted even by the heathen--"Ira furor brevis est," etc.--and verified by experience. Therefore, upon authority of Psalm 4, 4, when you feel your wrath rising, sin not, but go to your chamber and commune with yourself. Let not wrath take you by surprise and cause you to yield to it. When slander and reproach is heaped upon you, or curses given, do not rashly allow yourself to be immediately inflamed with anger. Rather, take heed to overcome the provocation and not to respond to it.

22. The apostle's first point, then, is: Christians should guard against yielding to wrath and impatience, and should remember the great blessings they enjoy--gifts wherewith all the advantages and favours of the world are unworthy of comparison.

23. Similarly, James says regarding the other point: "Wherefore putting away all filthiness and overflowing of wickedness," etc. By "filthiness" he means the impure life of the world-- indulgence, voluptuousness and knavery of every sort. These things, he would say, should be far from you Christians who enjoy blessings so great and glorious. Could you rightly recognize and appreciate these blessings, you would regard all worldly pursuits and pleasures mere filth in comparison. Nor is this overdrawn; they are, such when contrasted with the good and perfect heavenly gifts and treasures.

24. "Receive with meekness the implanted word." You have the Word, James says, a Word which is yours not by your own fancy or effort, but which God, by grace, gave to you-- implanted in you. It has free course--is preached, read and sung among you. (By the grace of God, it is free among us, too.) In this respect, God be praised, there is no lack. It is of the utmost importance, however, to receive it, to make profitable use of it; to handle it with meekness that we may hold it fast and not allow it to be effaced by anger under persecution or by the allurements of worldly lusts. Christ says (Lk 21, 19), "In your patience possess ye your souls [ye shall win your souls]."

MEEKNESS AND PATIENCE ENJOINED.

Meekness and patience are necessary to enable us to triumph over the devil and the world. Without them we shall not be able to hold fast the Word in our strife against those evil forces. We must fight and contend against sin, but if we essay to cool our wrath by grasping the devil and his followers by the hair and wreaking vengeance upon them, we will accomplish nothing and may thereby lose our treasure, the beloved Word. Therefore, lay hold of the Word planted or engrafted within you, that you may be able to retain it and have it bring forth its fruit in yourself.

THE POWER OF THE WORD.

25. It is a Word, says James in conclusion, "which is able to save your souls." What more could be desired? You have the Word, the promise of all divine blessings and gifts. It is able to save you if you but steadfastly cleave to it. Why, then, need you take any account of the world, and anything it may do, whether good or evil? What injury can the world render, what help can it offer, so long as you hold the treasure of the Word? Observe that the apostle ascribes to the spoken Word, the preached Gospel, the power to save souls. Similarly, Paul commends it to the Romans (ch. 1, 16), in almost the same words, as "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."

26. Now, the Word is implanted within you in a way to give you the certain comfort and sure hope of your

salvation. Be careful, then, not to permit yourselves to be wrested from it by the wrath or the filth of the world. Take heed to accept in purity and to maintain with patience the Word so graciously and richly given you by God without effort or merit on your part. Those who are without the Word, and yet endeavour to attain heaven, what efforts have they made in the past! What efforts are they making today! They might torment themselves to death; they might institute and celebrate every possible service--they would accomplish nothing. Is it not better to cling to the Word and maintain this treasure whereby you attain salvation and divine Sonship than to permit the world to wrest you from it through persecution, passion or moral filth the source of its own ruin and perdition?.

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