

## Law and Gospel: James and Paul

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I hate to admit it, but sometimes I worry about what kind of Lutheran I'm becoming. I just can't help it. I love the Book of James, Martin Luther's protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. I've tried to be suspicious of its love for the law. I've tried to apply my critical analytic skills to warn against thinking that works complete the perfect witness that mere faith lacks. I know that it is God's grace that ultimately matters. I know that Christ's ultimate sacrifice for us on the cross is the key, the cornerstone, the foundation of all things Christian, of everything that matters when it comes to our salvation. But there is a simplicity in James that I can't help but love. There is a directness in James that says what it means and means what it says that can't help but help us to see what God desires of those He has made His people. I've tried not to, but I love this letter.

Now, don't get me wrong. I listen to the news – 9.7% unemployment; 216,000 jobs lost in August; millions lost since January; global contractions; it's a complicated mess out there. But James boils it down to something simple. "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and wanting to help, one of you shares the gospel – saved by grace through faith – but fails to offer anything practical that actually meets their daily needs, what's the good of that?" (James 2:15-16) *Give a man a fish, and you have fed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you have fed him for life.* That's great advice; but better yet, imagine a food pantry, and match your soaring rhetoric with daily bread – or, as Shirley Cavender put it, meat and toilet paper.

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?" (James 2:14) The truth is that it is neither our faith nor our works that saves us. God's grace has done the heavy lifting. In matters of salvation, God's grace has done all the lifting. It isn't just sin we're in bondage to; we are in bondage to death, and there's nothing we can do to cancel death's claims. Faith isn't a *thing* that we do to fool death into forgetting about us. Faith is the other side of our acknowledging that only God's grace can save us. Only God's grace can make the crucial difference. Only God's grace can break the curse and cancel the claim of death's finality and inevitability. I get all that. But still I love the practical bent that comes through the simple wisdom we read in James. "You do well to fulfill the royal law, which simply stated is this – 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (James 2:8) Can it get any clearer? James identifies the challenge of the law; and he places it right there in front of us as a truth to be grasped, a God to love, and a neighbor to love.

Here's another practical truth: "Judgment will be without mercy to anyone who judges without mercy." If that isn't clear enough, then listen to the kicker: "Mercy trumps judgment." (James 2:13) Doesn't that say it all? James is known for his characteristic

connection between the profound and the practical, between lofty ideas reaching the heights of heaven and ordinary, concrete meanings with down-to-earth applications. In *James* we read about the perfect law of liberty, the essence of true religion, loving God and serving our neighbors. We sense that the crowning glory of saving faith is found in good works, works that complete faith and prove faith true. We can't help but notice James sees a connection between faith and works that diverges widely from the arguments Paul makes and the truths he proclaims as the power of the gospel for all who believe. It was this divergence between James and Paul that raised Luther's suspicions, inspired his concerns, and aroused his criticisms.

Allow me to offer a not-entirely-disconnected aside on this matter. We don't often think about it, but the New Testament preserves three distinct responses to the betrayal Judas inflicted on Jesus, and his own tragic demise. In Acts 1:26, we read how the Twelve decided to replace Judas. Through the casting of lots and the drawing of straws, the Twelve decided that Matthias should take the place vacated by Judas. Some say that God decided that Paul should become the last and greatest of the Apostles. Paul's writings dominate the New Testament. In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15, Paul recounts tradition's recollection of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to the apostles. "He appeared to Peter, then to the Twelve, to more than five hundred at one time, to James, and then to all the apostles." Then, he offers an important autobiographical snippet: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle.... But by the grace of God – God's choice, God's call – I am what I am." And what is that? Paul says it directly in Romans, namely, "a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God." (Romans 1:1)

There is another with claims to the right to take his place alongside the Twelve, one who was highly regarded as a follower, who was with Jesus, not only from the beginning, but before the beginning, namely, Jesus' brother James. In the history of the church, James played a prominent role among Jesus' followers in Jerusalem. Among scholars who follow these matters, it is said that James represented the camp that thought Jerusalem should remain central to the organization of the church, that Judaism should remain crucial in defining Christianity, and that the Davidic sense of dynasty had its best chance of continuing the family line through James – at least, for those who hadn't read the *Da Vinci Code*. James, as Jesus' brother, was a leader in the Christian community from the beginning. With his base in Jerusalem and his love for the law, he represented everything Paul argued against. Paul was not unfamiliar with hopes for a new Davidic dynasty.

In the very same passage quote above from Romans, where Paul talks about his being an apostle, he addresses this dynasty stuff directly. Jesus was declared to be a Son of David according to the flesh, with his lineage traced through Joseph (as was James'); but he was designated the Son of God by the Spirit's power with the event of the Resurrection. (Romans 1:4) There is no dynasty to be maintained, but only the gospel to be proclaimed. Paul diverges widely from James in talking about another important base point, namely,

the meaning of Abraham for the Christians. James uses Abraham to illustrate the age-old adage, *righteous is as righteous does*. “Wasn’t Abraham justified by works,” James writes (in the passage that immediately follows our Second Lesson), “when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?” James is saying that, while faith was active right alongside his works, his works completed his faith. (James 2:21-22) Paul takes the exact opposite approach in Romans 4, where he affirms that “it all depends on faith ... so that the promise may rest on grace and be extended to all....” (Romans 4:16) Abraham is an important figure in the history of salvation. He is not just the father of Israel, but the father of us all, based not on the law, but on God’s grace. “Abraham believed God, and that was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Both James and Paul say as much. But for Paul, it isn’t about us and our impressive works. It is about God and His amazing grace.

Paul saw these differences as fundamental. Israel, Jerusalem, the Law: these have their place in the story of salvation. But Jesus sends his disciples out to Galilee (see Mark 16). He heals the daughter of a Syro-Phoenician woman (here in Mark 7). Something new and radical has arrived with Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom, which will extend the Good News of salvation to Gentiles, to the nations, to the whole world. James comforts us with what we know and what we’re used to; but Jesus said that the old wineskins we’ve grown comfortable with will burst when the new wine of true life flows from Christ’s blood into ours (read Mark 2). That’s the vision that drove Paul to insist that faith is the key because grace is what grounds the promise of salvation and establishes the new covenant, which has burst upon the scene in the person of Jesus to claim the world through the gospel.

Our Gospel Lesson seems to agree on this point. Sure, Jesus hesitates when it comes to responding to the Syro-Phoenician woman: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” The woman is sharp and clever: “Even the dogs under the table wait with eager longing for the children’s crumbs.” But Jesus’ point is to move beyond this witty exchange. In one breath, he reaffirms the chronology of salvation history, to the Jew first, and then to Gentiles. But his actions reaffirm that the whole world is included in the kingdom he has come to proclaim and establish. That’s the message he affirms with his post-resurrection instructions not to hang around Jerusalem, but to meet him in Galilee.

Paul takes this theme, and drives it home. The grace of God, the promise to Abraham, the Good News of the gospel proclaimed to all: for all these reasons, it is not the Law that is key. Rather, it is the Cross, the Good News of Christ Crucified, regarded as foolish folly by the Greek, and as scandalous offense to Jews; but to those who believe, both Jew and Greek, it is the wisdom of God’s ways and the power of God’s love. This is the Good News that breaks new ground in the ministry of Jesus and through the preaching of Paul. Whether through the lofty rhetoric of Paul or the practical wisdom of James, it is this Good News that is extended to all who are called to make the connection between loving the Lord and serving our neighbors by living our faith through the worship we offer and the love that we share ... in Jesus’ name. Amen