

Struggle and Clarity

Psalm 119:105-112; James 1:18-25

A few weeks ago, we read this letter from James through the eyes of Martin Luther, who a little over 500 years ago sat in a small stone study in an upper corner of Wartburg Castle in East Germany. And there, at his desk next to his wood stove, Luther understood the Bible to be teaching something quite different than what his medieval contemporaries usually understood it to mean. For a thousand years, the popes and bishops who had laid the foundation and set the boundaries for medieval Christianity had not allowed the common people to read God's Word in their own national languages.

But now Luther, having caught the popes and bishops wrong on one issue, had set himself to translating the whole New Testament into his native German in a single year. And the result was that in one generation, in the early 1500's, most of northern Europe, led by scholars like Luther and Zwingli and Calvin and Knox, they went back to the apostles of Jesus and the prophets beginning with Moses and they found in God's Word a way of understanding history and people and life that had been lost for the most part for a thousand years. Which is not to say that Luther and Calvin and company got everything absolutely right, flash-bang, right there and then.

They were medievalists, they were fallen, bound by patterns and blind spots that prevented them from understanding Moses and Jesus and Law and Gospel in its entirety. They missed things. But they were right to think that in the Bible, God has given us a message from heaven that will free us to become what he meant us to be and to live as he meant us to live to the extent that we're willing to be shaped and molded by what the Bible actually says. And we saw that for all of them, especially Luther here in James, taking God's word to heart for what it really says can be a struggle.

Because actually hearing what an apostle or a prophet said, actually taking to heart what the Holy Spirit wants us to make of these words is something of an art and a science. Not only do we have to get the grammar right and hear the human authors in their own historical context, but we have to understand and weigh our own passions and desires and prejudices, so as not to bend Moses' law and Jesus' gospel to mean something that will allow us to stay as we are, comfortable and satisfied and unchanged when in fact God the Holy Spirit is calling us in his Word to do or become something we would never choose if we hadn't heard from God. This life Jesus called us to is different than what comes naturally.

So Luther struggled with James, was tempted to throw his translation of James into the wood stove next to his desk. And I'm not aware that he was ever able to weave the words of James into the gospel of grace that Luther saw so clearly and found so liberating in the rest of the New

Testament. And, the truth be told, Christians of all stripes through the centuries since have struggled with this passage or that, not getting it at first glance, having to wait on God to open their minds or change their hearts so that what seems an impossible word at first glance finally comes clear.

And we learn in our passage this morning that James himself was not unaware of the difficulty God's word poses to fallen men and women like you and me when we wrestle to take it to heart. So he begins this morning by reminding us that really believing in a true gospel is a great deal more supernatural than reading a book and passing an exam. James writes us, "*Of his own will, God brought us forth by the Word of truth that we might be a sort of first fruits among his creatures.*"

So, more than our simply reading words on a page, more than our merely mastering concepts, it is God who works in our hearts to "*to bring us forth*" when our eyes see and our ears hear "*the word of truth*" in our Bibles. This Greek verb to "bring forth" was typically used to describe childbirth and what James is after here is very similar to what Jesus had said to Nicodemus late one night in John's gospel. Because Nicodemus had read pages and pages of Law and Prophets and Psalms and Proverbs, but Jesus warned the old rabbi that human mastery of written words isn't enough. None of us are really alive, none of us is "*born from above*", Jesus said, until the Spirit brings what we read and hear to life in our hearts.

So James tells us, "*God brought us forth*". God makes us alive when his Spirit breathes life into what we read in "*the Word of truth*". It is the Spirit and the Word of truth working hand in hand together that instill the life of Jesus into our dead and sinful hearts, and it's when that happens that we become "*a sort of first fruits*", James said, we are the first sprouts early in the season of the new creation, the new heaven and earth that was set into motion when Jesus rose from the dead.

So God does something supernatural inside us when his Spirit opens our minds and softens our hearts to become the people his Word commands us to be. And, as he writes this, James presumes two things about us. The first is that we are "*born from above*", James presumes that Spirit and gospel together have brought our hearts alive to God with resurrection life that comes when we give our hearts to Jesus. So James presumes that we and his readers both are the "*first fruits*" of a whole new way of life. "*This you know, my beloved brothers and sisters*", James writes.

But the second presumption James makes is that, like Luther and Calvin and all the rest, even though we're born in the Spirit, even though we've already come alive to heavenly values and priorities and affections, we will still struggle to understand and take to heart what God's Word says because it teaches a way of life so foreign to what we're used to, so foreign to what we

knew before Christ and Spirit and gospel began to work in our hearts. So James knows and we should know that we're born again if we've given our hearts to Christ.

Nevertheless, James has to warn us, "*...but let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.*" The point being that God does not make us holy, or honest, or faithful, he does not teach us to love and forgive by putting us under a spell and overriding everything we were before we came alive to God and alive to what is really true. God is not in the process of turning any of us into zombies or robots.

The whole point of God's giving us a book, a Word of truth is for him to win over our hearts, to convince our minds that heaven's way of life is true, and better than what we were before, even though at first glance God's commands may seem foreign and impossible. So James warns us, "*...be quick to hear*". There is no way to know or love Christ without first listening to things that we would never have imagined or wanted unless Christ spoke them to us in a gospel. How many things did Jesus teach, only to have to say when he was finished, "*Let him who has ears to hear, hear!*"?

So it's not automatic that when God says something to us, we'll be willing to hear it. All too often, the sound of gospel truth provokes a flash of anger that prevents us from taking the truth to heart. So James goes on, "*...but let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.*" Among modern evangelicals there is a presumption that if we just say it right, if we just couch the truth kindly enough, generously enough, skillfully enough, people will be glad to hear it and willing to live it out.

Of course, a quick reading of how people responded to Jesus in the gospels and to the apostles in the Book of Acts shows what nonsense it is to think that fallen people are glad to hear the truth. Truth-tellers, as often as not, get run out of town, or stoned, or even crucified.

And what James wants us to remember is that believers continue to be fallen people even after we are born of the Spirit and alive to the Word of truth. It follows that even after we belong to Christ, we will have that first angry reaction that rises up in us when some gospel word exposes us to be wrong and sinful in some aspect of life. So James exhorts his readers and us, "*Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted Word which is able to save your souls.*" Because, even as Christians, there are things in us that'll tempt us away from God and from truth if we won't face them.

The word James uses for "*filthiness*" comes from a Greek stem that appears something like five times in the New Testament, all in letters from the Galilean disciples, here in James, in 1st Peter, and from John in the last chapter of the Book of Revelation. It is a pungent term meant to

convey God's disgust for behavior that indulges fleshly desire in defiance of the commands and covenants God gave to define holiness and faithfulness. The trick being that it is behavior that won't seem filthy to us. We are all prone to kid ourselves that our intentions are good and our wants and needs are noble until and unless the Spirit confronts us with what the commandments and covenants actually say.

And James goes on here to add another descriptor "*rampant wickedness*". The word for wickedness or evil is all over the New Testament, and it describes a general sort of rebellion and disobedience that comes naturally to fallen human hearts. But here James adds the word "*rampant*" to suggest a sort of wildness, wine overflowing the cup, animals stampeding the fence.

And the notion here is that, untamed by God's Spirit in our hearts and his truth in our minds, there is a sort of impulsivity to sin that can carry us away from what we know is right before we can gather our thoughts to guard against it. Sin is always in a hurry, sin wants to own our hearts and run our lives before we've had time to work through the implications. Jesus, on the other hand, wants nothing from us that we haven't thought through and don't really want to give him. Jesus warned his disciples and us to "*count the cost*", he said, before we set our lives to following his ways.

"What builder," Jesus asked, *"begins to build a tower without sitting down and counting whether he has money to finish the project? What king goes to war without first counting the size of the forces arrayed against him?"* The point being that sin offers us a sort of cheap fulfillment, a kind of quick happiness that ends up enslaving us the more we opt for it. Christ, on the other hand demands a hard choice, a surrendering of ourselves and a sacrificing of our wants and needs, that frees us to become our true selves in his company and with his help.

Because Christ loves us and wants to teach us the sort of love he showed for us on the cross, a love that puts God and others first. So certain was Jesus of his own Father's love that he was willing to sacrifice everything a young man of thirty years would have wanted in life, wife and children, work and home, and food and shelter, and friends and neighbors. None of it wrong, all of it he was entitled to. But he had a covenant with the Father he loved to become the Sacrifice for our wrongs, the Savior of our souls, the Lord of our futures, so that we could enjoy the things he went without, so that we could possess all the blessings that are rightfully his for all eternity.

Jesus was absolutely loved and he did absolutely love which I think made him the freest, happiest man who ever lived, poverty and rejection, tears and suffering and all. And what Jesus offers us is entry into that circle of love that has always existed between Father, Son and Spirit and that God always wanted to extend to us. But our sin, our selfishness has made that kind of

love a foreign language to us. We don't know how it works, we don't know how to get there. So we are tempted to settle for less and to lose our souls in the process.

So James closes our passage this morning by challenging us to put aside what is selfish and sinful and less and he says, "...to receive in meekness the Word implanted which is able to save your souls." The "meek", Jesus taught will "inherit the earth" because meek people aren't angered when "the Word of truth" tells them they're wrong and need to change, they aren't full of opinions that must be spoken when their own way of life comes into question, and they aren't too big and strong and proud to take a gospel and a Savior to heart. Which matters because the dividing line between gospel and Savior in the New Testament is all too often hard to find.

In his gospel, John calls God the Son "the Word" who "was with God... in the beginning" and who "was God". Jesus called himself "the Way, the Truth and the Life". He didn't just teach the truth, he is the Truth. Here James calls his older half brother, "the Word implanted who is able to save your souls." The point being that James has more than Bible memory in mind here.

It is not words from a book that save anyone's soul, it is the living breathing Word of God, God's own Son who takes residency in our hearts through the Spirit he sent us. And what James is exhorting the early Christians and us to do is to be meek when God's word is open and his Spirit is present, to give God a word in edgewise, to not bridle in anger when we hear or read read some promise or command that doesn't fit life as we've lived it up till now. After all, truth is not like sin.

Sin rushes you down a path and then makes you its slave once you've followed it. The Truth, on the other hand, will take the time it needs to win our hearts and convince our minds. Because God's truth is not some abstract, relentless, merciless doctrine stampeding us in some direction that will do us harm. The Truth, after all, is Jesus who came to share with us the love and holiness that he has known with Father and Spirit from all eternity past. To be absolutely loved and to learn to absolutely love is the be absolutely free and that freedom is where the Truth will lead us.