

No letter in the New Testament surprises me more than James.

Even its history in the hands of various interpreters is fascinating: the early church was skeptical of it; famous humanists of the European Renaissance questioned its authorship, and Martin Luther dismissed it as a “letter of straw.” Why? Because it apparently lacked the gospel, the reassuring news of God’s unfailing and unconditional love for us in Jesus Christ.

James, in other words, has a lot of “baggage.” I imagine some preachers, at least in the Lutheran tradition, bypass it for this reason whenever it surfaces in the lectionary. I have done that before too, but this year I decided to take a different path.

I wanted to give James a second hearing.

I wanted to uncover, as the radio broadcaster Paul Harvey used to say, *the rest of the story*.

What I had yet to learn was that Luther himself would return to James after consigning it to the status of straw, primarily because of the lectionary he was using. In so doing, he caught a glimpse of the gospel, the good news that we are children of God—not by anything we have done, but by what God has done.

Being “born again” as children of God comes not from any effort on our part. That includes accepting Jesus as our lord and personal savior. Instead, the gradual rebirthing process whereby we increasingly live for God and neighbor instead of simply for ourselves stems from God, who “implants” the Word within us and makes it grow (James 1:21).

In response to the transformation within us that God has begun **purely by grace, purely as a gift**, good deeds or “works of love” should naturally and spontaneously “break forth,” Luther says, at least where faith is right.

Doing good deeds for others, it turns out, will not save anyone. Instead, these deeds ideally presuppose the saving work God has already initiated within us. They are visible signs of grace from God that we have already received!

The good news of being God’s children by grace, which appears briefly in chapter one, serves as the foundation of the emphasis the author places on the need for good works in the rest of the letter: **you are a child of God**, James says to each of us, but not by your own doing. You are the Father’s child because of His grace, the “perfect gift” that “comes from above.”

Go now and live for others, James says, as a testament to what God has done in and for you. Remember the widow in her distress and remember the poor. Be kind. Be civil. Be forgiving. Listen before you judge, and work for justice. And so, it would seem, we have *the rest of the story* when it comes to James.

In truth, however, we do not.

More Surprises Await Us

Other ambiguities in James led Luther to warn readers, despite the good news it contains, of its “dangerous tendencies.” Nowhere is that more apparent than James 2:14.

Listen (or read) carefully: “What good is it, my brothers and sister, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?”

Now tell me: who is the focus here?

You are the focus, correct? James appears to be addressing each of you and me personally, right?

“What good is it,” he asks, “if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?”

No wonder Luther did not like James! His message, following Paul, was that the righteous live by faith, not performing good deeds. If that were the case, how could we ever know we’ve done enough to merit God’s favor?

Fortunately, we can resolve this quickly by reminding ourselves what James means by faith. Proper faith should inspire works of love; these “works” should arise spontaneously in response to what God has *already done* for us by making us God’s children.

But this verse has another problem.

According to the Greek, the original language of the letter, James uses the third person singular at two crucial points in the passage. “What good is it,” he asks, “if anyone says they have faith, but does not have good works? Can faith save him?”

Do you hear (or see) the difference? The word “you” never appears in the Greek. Our translation of James misleads us. Other English translations typically render these pronouns in the third person rather than the second, rendering them “anyone” and “him” rather than “you.”

A Pronoun Problem

If this passage is not *ultimately* about you, then to whom does James refer when he asks, “Can your faith save him?” The answer appears in the next two verses (James 2:15-16).

Listen (or read) again carefully: “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what good is that?”

Now about whom is James concerned here? Obviously, it is your brother or sister in need! James is asking his audience a rhetorical question: “Can faith [alone] save *him*?”

What good is it, in other words, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save *your neighbor in need*?

Faith without works is dead, we discover, because it does nothing for your neighbor! It’s not about you. The good news in this verse is not *for you* since, as chapter one confirms, you have *already* been embraced by God; it’s *through you* to and for *your neighbor*.

James, it turns out, is not always to blame for what Luther perceives to be its “dangerous tendencies.” Sometimes translations create problems too, as is the case in James 2:14 as well as in James 5:13-20, our second reading for today.

More Problems to Untangle

The last chapter of James (chapter five) raises several questions. Why, for starters, does the author focus on the cheerful, telling them to praise God among those who suffer and are sick. That seems insensitive, doesn’t it? Fortunately, Gay L. Byron of Howard University offers a generous way to read James’ message. “This is a sure reminder,” she writes, “to those who have faced hardships and persevered through trials and tribulations (James 1:2), that there will also be periods [in life] of joy and times for celebration. Thus, ‘singing songs of praise’ through good times as well as through times of great suffering or grave danger [can illustrate] how praise and prayer are coupled together in the eyes of God” (Working Preacher, 9/26).

I like that. To those of you who have suffered loss or who find yourselves overcome with pain or serious illness, perhaps the happiness of others can at least *sometimes* remind you that “there will also be periods [in your life] of joy.”

But what about other verses in the same passage? James also says that the prayer of faith will “save the sick, and that the Lord will raise them up,” which—we know—does not always happen (5:15). He even seems to put salvation in our hands rather than God’s, telling us “that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:20).

Fortunately, a closer look at the original language resolves these problems too.

Look at v. 15. Notice how James uses the words “save” and “raise.” These terms should “ring a bell” for us as Christians. As commentator Timothy Cargal explains, “All the other uses of ‘save’ in the Letter of James . . . have the sense of salvation and eternal life” (*New Testament Fortress Commentary*, p. 665). The word “raise” likewise points to our eternal destiny, the resurrection, of which Christ was the “first fruits” (1 Cor 15:20). “Thus,” Cargal concludes, “the ‘sacrament of the sick’ [v. 14] holds out the hope that even if physical healing does not come, there remains God’s promise of wholeness in the life to come” (*ibid.*).

But what about people who stray from the faith? Are we the ones who save them from death for the eternal wholeness God promises? The last verse apparently says as much: “whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

Now take a closer look at the verse. Notice the word “sinner.” In the Greek, as some of your translations will tell you, the word in question simply means “his” (*autou*) which raises a fascinating question: “Is it the ‘sinner’s soul’ that is saved . . . or is it the soul of ‘whoever brings back the sinner?’ Perhaps James intends the ambiguity because it is in doing such things that *one makes the neighbor one’s focus rather than oneself*, looking out in this case for his or her spiritual welfare instead of one’s own.

Hell, we might infer, is not “other people,” as the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once said. It’s the isolation and ultimately the intolerability of self that comes with self-obsession and self-preoccupation.

The true Way, the Christian Way, the Way of Jesus Christ, draws us outside of ourselves through care and concern for our neighbor. This is the message. Who better to lead us, once the ambiguities of translation are clarified, than James?

What a surprise, indeed!

Amen