

## The James We Never Knew, 8/29/21

Most of us know the parable.

We hear it once every three years as our Sunday morning Gospel reading. Speaking to the crowd around him, Jesus compares the kingdom from heaven to a wedding banquet given by a king for his son. After learning that the initial guests have ignored his invitation, the king sends his servants out into the streets to invite **everyone they see**. Assuming the king represents God, this parable conveys the good news of God's wide, inclusive mercy: nobody will be left out. All will be invited.

But then the story takes a sharp turn—or rather, a nose-dive! The king sees a guest who lacks the proper attire for a wedding, so he has his attendants throw this man into the “outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 22:13). The story ends with a harsh teaching: Jesus tells his listeners that while “**many are called . . . few are chosen**” (Matt 22:14).

Our liturgy takes the sour ending of this otherwise promising parable and turns it into a contradiction. Having just read to the congregation the line about a man thrown into the outer darkness, the preacher says, “The Gospel of the Lord.” You as the congregation reply, perhaps while smirking, “Thanks be to God.” Why smirk? Because you know that what you just heard, even though it appears **in a Gospel, conveys nothing of the gospel**, that is, the

good news of God's salvation in Christ for all people (see 1 Tim 4:10).

As a Lutheran, in other words, you have a nose for the gospel—or at least an ear for discrepancy!

Many Lutherans have a similar response to the Book of James, our second reading for the day. They smirk when they hear its name. Timothy Wengert, author of *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther*, wonders why:

Saying “Luther” and “James” in the same sentence, **makes Lutherans groan or smile knowingly**, but few know Luther's actual comments. In a study of English Puritan interpretations of James, Derek Cooper discovered that, even if these divines of the mid-seventeenth century knew nothing else about Luther, they at least knew this: he did not like James and had tried to remove it from the [Bible]. They all knew that he called it an epistle of straw” (“Building on the One Foundation with Straw: Martin Luther and the Epistle of James,” p. 258).

Luther's relegation of James to the **literary “junk mail” of the New Testament** seems to be common knowledge not only among Lutherans but among Christians of other traditions as well (Elliott, “The Epistle of James in Rhetorical and Social Scientific Perspective,” p. 71). Some of us may even know the reason behind Luther's disdain: James focuses on **good deeds rather than good news, on what we must do to make ourselves right**

**with God (which inevitably fails) versus what God has done to make us right with God through Christ.**

As it turns out, Luther may be on to something. James mentions Christ by name **all but twice in five chapters** (1:1, 2:1), fewer than almost any other letter of the New Testament. But is there more to Luther's attitude than mere disdain, and if so, what is "**the rest of the story,**" as the radio broadcaster Paul Harvey used to say?

What did Luther actually think about this letter after he dismissed it early in his career as a letter of straw?

For my part, I must offer a confession: until recently, **I had no idea.**

Ever since I read Luther's preface to James as a seminary student, the one where he explicitly refers to the text as a letter of straw, I assumed he had hardly anything more to say on the subject. James was junk. While preparing for today's message, however, my view changed. Perhaps yours will too as I share with you, thanks to a little help from Martin Luther, the *James we never knew*.

## **Prior Knowledge**

Here's what I already knew. Luther's disavowal of James was probably contextual. As the Reformation began, one of his university colleagues praised the book excessively (Lull, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, p. 112, n.

11). “Why praise such a book,” we might imagine Luther replying, “when it bears **no witness to Christ, his death, or his life-giving resurrection?** Apostles preach Christ, not works of the law.”

The word “apostle” in Greek means to be sent forth for a specific task, in this case, to proclaim Christ and his victory for **all people** over sin and death. This explains why Luther had the same problem with Revelation he had with James. “Christ,” he says, “is neither taught nor known in it. But to teach Christ this is the thing which an apostle is bound above all else to do” (“Preface to the Revelation of St. John,” 1522).

Why is it so important to cling to those books in Scripture which preach or teach Christ? **Because it’s Christ who saves you!** “Believing in the Bible,” including its various prophecies, won’t spare you from sin or save you from death. **It’s trusting in Christ,** the one to whom the various authors of the New Testament point, who will. More broadly, it’s trusting in the promises *both testaments* contain of God’s grace and mercy that serves as source of our reassurance and hope.

Think about it. When you find yourself troubled or afraid, anxious or in despair and you go to the Bible, you don’t seek out the **laws of Leviticus or the genealogies of Genesis for comfort!** You go to the Word within the words, the promises of **God’s compassion and care** that dot the literary landscape of Isaiah and the Psalms. That’s precisely what Luther did! Other books of the Bible might

pique your curiosity, but since they do not pertain to your salvation, says Luther, they have less value. Focus on the texts that give you reassurance and there you will find God's Word **in** the Bible.

I knew all this. Perhaps some of you did too. Maybe you read about it on your own or heard about it in a forum or sermon. Luther possessed **a remarkable freedom** when it came to Scripture, but it wasn't arbitrary. He evaluated its books according to the **apostolic criterion**: does it lead us to Christ? If not, its importance was secondary.

You can imagine how well that would go over today.

True, when it came to curbing the bad behavior of Christians around him, Luther would turn to James. He used it, for instance, to preach against the chaos and disorder that broke out in Wittenberg shortly after the Reformation began. **James was darn good on the law, but here's where its usefulness for Luther ends—or so I thought.**

## **What I Learned**

Before I tell you what I discovered regarding Luther's view of James, I have to be honest: **I thought he was wrong.** We *can* find the gospel in James, I insisted once in a sermon, but we need to look at the text more closely than he did. Consider James 2:13. It says that "mercy triumphs over judgment." There you have it, I remember

thinking when I read these words. This verse breaks Luther's neck, as one of his opponents said of him in the heat of an argument. James is more than a book of rules. It contains the gospel too. Luther just missed it.

A closer look at the text, however, shows that in Germany (as Luther replied to his opponent) **necks don't break so easily**. When James says that "mercy triumphs over judgment," he's prescribing proper *behavior* to members of his faith community. Refrain from judging others, he tells them, for those who show no mercy will receive no mercy. How is this anything but another "deed" a person must perform to make him or herself right with God? **Maybe there is no gospel in James after all.**

What I had yet to learn was that Luther would return to James after he dismissed it as a letter of straw, primarily because it was in the lectionary that he continued to follow even after his break with Rome. In so doing, he uncovered the gospel, only in a place I would have never imagined. It appears in James 1:17-27, which just so happens to be in our lectionary today.

In James 1:17-18, 21, Luther focuses on five key terms: the *gift* that comes "from above" (v. 17), the *birth* that God gave us (v. 18), the "word of truth" which occasions the birth we receive from God (v. 18), the "first fruits" of God's new creation (v. 18), and the "implanted word" (v. 21). Let's look at each briefly.

James tells us that “every perfect gift” comes from God the Father, who **makes us His children by causing us to be born anew**. The “word of truth,” which comes from God, brings about our new birth; it doesn’t come from us. Once “implanted,” the word takes root within us, sprouting outwardly into works of love. When we care for the least fortunate, particularly “orphans and widows in distress,” as James 1:27 says, **we give witness to the inner-transformation God has *begun* in us by making us “the first fruits of his creatures” after Christ** (see 1 Cor 15:20).

For Luther, James’ use of the phrase “first fruits” bears special significance. The recognition that God has *begun* the work within us of transformation encourages us accept ourselves as imperfect. Becoming a child of God takes a lifetime! What a relief to know that when we make mistakes, when we hurt our neighbor or ignore the poor, **God isn’t finished with us yet**.

Likewise, when we fail to listen, speak over others, or let our anger get the best of us (drawing on the examples James provides), we realize that each of us has more room to grow.

What incredible news. Instead of beating yourself up for falling short, take the long view: remember that the transformation God has begun within you reflects the “first fruits” of God’s new creation. When you stumble, don’t look up to see how far you’ve fallen. Look forward. Look ahead. Remind yourself that God has *begun* to work

within you, the completion of which lies in the future “beyond this world to the edge of the next” (Wengert, p. 255).

Knowing that you are a child of God, that God has embraced you and begun within you the *lifelong process of being born anew*, make amends with others you may have wronged and try next time to do otherwise. Just be mindful of your motivation: good deeds or works of love should “break forth,” as Luther says, from the reassurance that God loves and claims you **no matter what**.

This is the **good news in James**, the gospel we glimpse in vv. 17-18 and 21 of today’s reading thanks to the interpretive efforts of the same man who earlier called it a letter of straw.

## **Teasing out the Gospel**

Based on his deep understanding of the gospel as it appears in Paul’s letters, Luther was able to “[tease] out of James the very witness to the gospel that makes any biblical text—or any sermon—truly good news” (Wengert, p. 254; italics original). When you find yourself feeling the burden of guilt for something you said or did, remember that God has merely begun to change you. Tomorrow is another day.

Yes, Luther called James a letter of straw. He warned his fellow Christians of its “dangerous tendencies” (Lull, p.



35). Indeed, he nearly eclipsed his discovery of the gospel in chapter one by subsequently condemning the letter for its misuse of Scripture in chapter two. That's because the author contradicted Paul's reading of the story of Abraham. Paul, you remember, emphasized how Abraham was righteous before God because of his trust in God. James, on the other hand, claimed that **“our ancestor Abraham [was] justified by [his] works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar”** (2:21). That made Luther angry because it put salvation in Abraham's hands (and by extension, ours) when it truly belongs in God's.

Luther had other problems with James too. Yet he was hardly alone. The ancient church was likewise skeptical of James (Wengert, p. 259). Other luminaries of the sixteenth century, including Erasmus of Rotterdam, likewise doubted (as did Luther) the letter's attribution to James, the disciple of Jesus. They thought it was a random collection of teachings put together by someone who lived after the apostolic era had ended.

What made Luther **stand out** from his contemporaries was the way he teased out the compact, truncated form of the gospel that appears the first chapter of James. This gave James apostolic authority, **no matter who wrote it. Indeed, Pilate or Herod could have written it for all Luther cared!** In the end, it's the message of Christ that counts, not the man who conceived it.

## Conclusion

Luther may have called James an epistle of straw. He may have criticized it, especially given the way its author interpreted the story of Abraham.

At the same time, thanks to the lectionary he followed, Luther never gave up on James or tried to avoid preaching on it. Even though the letter mentions Christ just twice, it still provides us with a glimpse of the gospel. “Becoming a child of God,” Luther writes, “did not grow in **our garden** . . . but came down from the ‘Father of light,’” who remakes us into God’s children by the power of the Holy Spirit, **inspiring us to do good things** and live for others instead of simply for ourselves (Wengert qtd. Luther, p. 254).

All the credit, all the glory, goes to Him.

The next time you hear of Luther’s disdain for James, be sure to remember **the rest of the story**. It’s not that Luther overlooked the gospel in James, as I originally thought, nor is it that James lacks the gospel altogether. Instead, we find a glimpse of its good news near the beginning of chapter one which serves as the foundation for message regarding good works that follows. **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, Luther says in unison with James, and live for others as a testament to what God has done in and for you. Remember the widow in distress and the poor. Be kind. Be civil. Be forgiving. Listen before you judge, and work for justice.

This is the message from the James I/we never knew.

Amen