

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 19, 2021

Psalm 54:1–7 (ESV):

1 O God, save me by your name,
and vindicate me by your might.

2 O God, hear my prayer;
give ear to the words of my mouth.

3 For strangers have risen against me;
ruthless men seek my life;
they do not set God before themselves. Selah

4 Behold, God is my helper;
the Lord is the upholder of my life.

5 He will return the evil to my enemies;
in your faithfulness put an end to them.

6 With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.

7 For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

First Reading: Jeremiah 11:18–20 (ESV):

18 The LORD made it known to me and I knew;
then you showed me their deeds.

19 But I was like a gentle lamb
led to the slaughter.

I did not know it was against me
they devised schemes, saying,
“Let us destroy the tree with its fruit,
let us cut him off from the land of the living,
that his name be remembered no more.”

20 But, O LORD of hosts, who judges righteously,
who tests the heart and the mind,
let me see your vengeance upon them,
for to you have I committed my cause.

EPISTLE: James 3:13–4:10 (ESV):

Wisdom from Above

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Warning Against Worldliness

4 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? 2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. 4 You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5 Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? 6 But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

THE GOSPEL - Mark 9:30–37 (ESV):

Jesus Again Foretells Death, Resurrection

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, 31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “**The Son of Man is going to be**

delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” **32** But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

Who Is the Greatest?

33 And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “**What were you discussing on the way?**” **34** But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. **35** And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “**If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.**” **36** And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, **37 “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”**

Sermon 38 – Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Diet of Faith”

James 3:13-4:10

Dear friends,

James is continuing the theme I talked about last week. He's scolding a little more, talking about the importance of behavior, that's still going on. He is also talking about sources. Where you get the thing matters in how good the thing is, and that is true for works or deeds as well. Where your deeds come from matters, what's inspiring you to do the things you do matters. James tells us that God is always working to put us where He wants us, doing the things He wants us to do, and that we should trust that instead of the deeds inspired by the world. Problem is, we're of the world, we're in this world, so let's see if James can make all that clear.

“13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.” Again, this is the purpose of James' letter. If you're wise, show it in your meek wisdom. If you understand, show that you understand by what you do. Good works are the fruit of faith. Just as the tree produces fruit as part of its life cycle, so we Christians produce good works as part of our life-cycle. They're not

forced, they're part of us naturally, and we make them sometimes without even knowing it. Now James will start with the contrast.

“14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.” You know where it comes from by what it is. Bitterness, jealousy, and selfish ambition come from the world, and James even goes a step farther by saying it is demonic. Bitterness is unforgiveness, which is completely contrary to God's will for us. Nurturing our personal Book of Grudges hollows us out, but more to the point it makes us a tool of the devil. To be jealous is to make oneself God, to decide for yourself that you deserve this thing or that thing, or you deserve to be that way. That's something that God alone can decide, particularly for those things that are beyond our control. Jealousness, we think, is what drove Satan to stage his rebellion, to become the devil that we know. He wanted to be God. When we are jealous of our neighbor, we imitate Satan's sin, and that is not something Christians should find themselves doing, but we do. Finally, selfish ambition. We should drive to better others first, not ourselves, but the motto of this world is “look out for number one.” “Me first.” God is not saying we cannot have aspirations, but we should always consider that there are others in our lives, and that our dreams effect them. They should come first. James goes further to highlight the effects of all this. Our sins are not kept to ourselves, they damage the world itself, they damage society, our communities, our families. There will be disorder and every vile practice where sin is allowed to flourish, and this is why Christians do not allow it to flourish without a fight. We try to make a hostile environment for sin. How do we do that? James goes into that next.

“17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” If it comes from the earth, it

comes from us, and that means you can't trust it. You can't use it without it staining you. Does this mean we should withdraw from the world, blocking out our ears to all evil? Run for the hills and build a commune? No. We'd just bring sin in with us, and that's not what James is talking about. He's talking about the ideas you engage with, what those ideas say is good or bad. He's talking about virtue, good living, that kind of thing. Kindness defined by God is constant and sure. Kindness and compassion defined by the world is fluid, uncertain, and changing all the time. James shows us the results of good, godly ideas. God's wisdom shows us purity. How? By making us pure. The more we read God's Word and engage with the ideas it presents, the more we hear it, the more it comes out. That purity is peaceful, gentle, and open to reason, and so are we supposed to be. We Christians are often accused of being close-minded, and we need to take those accusations seriously sometimes, because we're called not to be. A little self-reflection is always a healthy practice. One of the regular habits of Christian living is making sure we're not the problem. From God's Word, we learn what peace is, so we can make it.

What is peace? It starts with forgiveness. Christ shows us this beautifully. Sinners and God are not at peace. Sinners want to be God, and they want God to move over and let them take control so it can go correctly, that is, the way we want it. God insists on retaining control, the same way a parent insists on driving on the car. It's safer that way and better that way. But we fight God for it. There isn't peace. When Jesus saves us, when He gives us the faith to trust Him, that conflict is ended. Jesus forgives our sins, washes them away, and now we trust, and now therefore we are at peace with God. It's the same among people. Conflict comes, James says, from our passions at war within us and among us. We want this, they want that, and so we fight. She wants it this way, he wants it this way, so we fight. Forgiveness and understanding bring peace between fighting parties, be they husband and wife, political parties, or nations themselves.

Why is this so hard for Christians? We're created to be better, God commands us to be better, why are we always stuck in the middle like we are? **"4 You adulterous**

people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5 Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? 6 But he gives more grace." One or the other. This is one of the more difficult and disturbing things that the Scripture tells us. One or the other. You can be friends with the world or friends with God, not both. That seems impossible, and it kind of tears us in two. We're sinner and saint so we feel connected to both. We don't want to live like monks, we want to have a good life with the people we love. But we want God as part of that life too. One or the other, the Scripture says. But how do we do that? James just answered us. He gives more grace. That's the only way. Remember what Jesus said? It is easier for the camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Are you guys rich? Maybe by the standards of the rest of the world, but what's in your bank account isn't the point. Why is it hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God? Why is it hard for Christians not to be friends with the world? Because the world has a lot of nice things, great beauty, and some wonderful people. These are gifts of God, but they're tainted by our sins.

So what do we do? We cannot eliminate our sin, and we cannot take ourselves from this world. James, though, provides something of an answer even if it is difficult to put into practice in a way that seems like it has any effect. **"7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."** That's it. Draw near to God, He will draw near to you. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. We can't leave this Earth until God calls us, we can't help that we love the people we love, that we are fond of many of the joys of this life. I don't think God wants to. I think these harsh words are meant to remind us not to get too fond of it, not to love it too much. We're not called to be monks, we're called to be Christians, in the world. We're called to show compassion and love for our neighbor, not disdain because he's a sinner. So what I think James is telling is to do is to maintain and strengthen that

bond you have with God, by hearing His Word, talking to Him in prayer, and doing the good that you can do. The first commandment is the most important, but it is only one commandment. God doesn't tell us to ignore the other ones, He just tells us to put that one first. So it is with our life today. God gives more grace. God draws near to you. I told you how this is done, it just often feels like it makes no difference, but James reminds us of what is true just as He reminds us of what is good. Keeping God at the center of your life, your time, keeping what God says in your mind throughout the day, will keep your relationship with God strong. He will make sure of it. Even if it feels like you're just opening your Bible and reading it a bit, and maybe you don't know what it means or how to think about it. It's still God drawing near to you. It's still God speaking to you, even if what He speaks doesn't change. Wrestle with it, and in that, we have our balance. Are we always going to end up valuing the things of this life more than the next? Absolutely. But as we maintain our relationship to God, He will work to winnow those things out of your heart. He will work to edit and trim and shape your faith and your love into what He wants it to be. We're just the ones trying to keep the connection going so He can do the work.

That's why what we consume, what we take in, is so important. If we have a diet of God's word and prayer, a steady intake, our faith is healthy. If we mess it up with the junk food the world offers, their idea of what compassion is, their ideas of what peace and happiness are, it can really gum things up. We can't avoid the junk food, but we can nourish our faith with the wholesome and wonderful food of truth, the things God says and promises to us.

Amen