

Giving Generously
James 1: 17-27
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CCUMC
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Introduction to James

This Sunday we move into a month-long series on the book of James, a short letter in the New Testament. Jumping into the lectionary texts for James might seem like a big leap from where we were in the Old Testament this summer. However, James is written by a Jewish author and uses Old Testament figures and examples extensively.¹ It is steeped in the symbolic world of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. The book resembles the Jewish wisdom tradition found in books like Proverbs; James' writing style contains many proverbs.

In fact, in some ways, James could be considered a book of Christian wisdom. It's comprised of loose essays on different themes. For the author of James, faith in Jesus means actually living in a way shaped by the words of Jesus. It is a book of practical ethics on loving your neighbor. For faith to be real it must be translated into deeds.

We begin our study of James, appropriately enough, with the first chapter. The first chapter sets forth a key organizing structure of the book---the contrast between the reality of the world, and the reality of God. Those who dwell in the reality of God practice a religion that necessarily gives to the needy and is expressed in outreach. Those who dwell only in the world become dominated by envy and duplicity. This first chapter also introduces the major themes of the book that James will develop in subsequent chapters; it might seem in the text for today that the author jumps around to several topics, but in reality he is providing a

¹ Luke Johnson, "James" in *New Interpreters Bible Commentary* vol.12 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 179.

sketch of what is to come.² In sum, the author of James is interested in a religion that is about less talking and more listening, that is about less talking and more doing for the most vulnerable. Let's dive in. . .

James 1: 17-27

Many great sayings exist in scripture on the subject of generosity. "Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water." (Proverbs 11:24-25) "Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor." (Proverbs 22:9) "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35) "God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 9:7). As Winston Churchill famously said, "we make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

I'm wondering if any of you this week experienced generosity from someone else. Did someone freely give to you something that you needed out of selfless love? Perhaps some of you received blessings this week by offering generosity to someone else. I will give you a moment to think about whether you gave or received generosity this week. (silence) Then turn to a neighbor and share your experience of generosity. (sharing) Does anyone have courage to briefly share an example of generosity this week?

God as Source of Generosity

Where do these acts of generosity come from? What grants us the capacity to love others selflessly? (allow for answer) God is right! In James 1:17 the text states, "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father." God is the source of every good gift. In fact, this scripture goes onto say that God is the source of our very life. God is the source of all that we have and all that we are. Our

² Sandra Hack Polaski, "Commentary on 2nd Reading: Lectionary for Sept. 2, 2012" workingpreacher.org.

existence exists because of the grand generosity of God. God calls human beings to life, and orients us to a life shaped by gift.³

A huge part of God's gifting to us, in addition to life, comes to us in the form of grace. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, called God's generosity to us prevenient grace. Prevenient means "to come before" so prevenient grace is God's grace that comes to us simply because we are—before we've done anything. Prevenient grace comes to us as outrageous generosity from the one who made us; it surrounds us and supports us from our very first breath until our very last one. When we respond to this ever-present prevenient grace by faith, we launch ourselves on the journey of a relationship with an amazingly generous God.

Our practice of generosity

On this journey of faith, God calls us to be generous to others, just as God has been generous to us. In a life grounded upon gift, we are to gift others. Our text of James for today concludes, "religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress." "Widows and orphans" is a synecdoche for the most vulnerable members of society. The author of James is teaching that true religion shows authenticity to a generous God by giving to the most poor and neglected. One of the key themes of the whole book of James is expressed right here; faith in Jesus means living in a manner shaped by loving others.⁴ Our faith must work out God's generosity.

John Wesley, our forefather in the faith, lived out generosity. The small Methodist communities, called societies, which Wesley developed in the industrializing 18th century, embodied generosity. The societies gave food and money to the needy, visited the sick, and

³ Luke Johnson, "James."

⁴ Ibid.

founded schools for impoverished children with no access to education.⁵ Wesley and early Methodists started workhouses for the poor to receive vocational training and jobs, provided wool for the poor to make clothing, and ministered to the condemned in prisons.⁶ Generosity was a key characterization of Methodism during its founding years, and continues today through active service work around the world by organizations such as UMVIM and UMCOR.

Wesley himself lived very simply, giving away most of the monies he received, and he died with just a few pence to his name. As Methodists became more affluent, he preached sermons on the good of giving, in particular a sermon called “The Use of Money.” In this sermon he developed the maxim “gain all you can, save all you can (and most importantly) give all you can. Wesley stresses this isn’t a tithe, but rather to “give all you can, all you have. For all that is laid out in this manner is really given to God.”⁷

Wesley’s example and the work of the early Methodists inspires us all to live generously. We are to live into James’ principle that all of life is a gift, and everything we have is gift—so therefore we are in turn to gift others. Interestingly enough, who do you think gifts more in American society—the poor or the rich? The US Bureau of Labor Statistic’s latest survey of giving shows that the poorest fifth of America’s households gave 4.3% of their incomes to charity, while the richest fifth gave at half that rate of 2.1%.-the middle class averages around 3%; the giving of the poor doesn’t decrease during the economic recession.⁸ When poor people were interviewed about their giving habits, one

⁵ Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 23-25.

⁶ Ibid, 125-126.

⁷ John Wesley, *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology* ed. by Albert Outler and Richard Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 355.

⁸ Frank Greve, “America’s poor are its most generous givers” *McClatchy Newspapers* (May 19, 2009).

man who tithed 10% said, “We’re not scared of poverty the way rich people are.” Another said that giving lights up their lives. Pastor Coletta Jones, who ministers to a low income church in Washington DC said that “when you have a little, you’re more thankful for what you have, but with every step you take up the ladder of success, the money clouds your mind and gets you into a state of never being satisfied.”⁹ This study of poor folks affirms the story of the widow of gave her last two copper coins, and Jesus said of her, “this widow has put in more than all others, for they gave out of abundance and she put in everything she had. (Mark 12).”

As the people in the study and the poor widow teach us, when we give fully out of the grace already given to us, our lives change. “Generosity changes us, filling us with joy and filling our lives with blessings. When we are generous with what we have, we find that unexpected blessings flow back into our lives, catching us by surprise.”¹⁰ Now we don’t decide to be generous to see what we can get it return; that corrupts the whole spirit of generosity. We give because God first gives to us.

This week I decided to practice generosity—with what is so precious to me: time. Generosity, after all, requires something of us; it’s not a simple donation of stuff that doesn’t matter. First, I knew in order to give to others, I had to be generous to myself—to be committed to prayer time with God, to eat well, to exercise, to sleep enough. Perhaps some of you are in a place where you need to practice generosity to yourself before you can give to others, which is perfectly good—as long as you don’t focus on yourself forever. I tried first to be generous to people I live with—which is often the hardest (it can be easier to give to a stranger than your own family sometimes!). My husband responded by giving me lots of time yesterday to go on a long bike ride with friends. Then I prepared a homemade meal to

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Adam Hamilton, *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*

take to a friend with a newborn. While she did some laundry, I held sweet baby Soren as he slept—what a gift! I offered to keep a friend’s child when he needed some time to work—then he wound up offering to keep Elijah for even longer time—and another friend kept Elijah. For every gift that I offered this week I received double in return. I was outgiven. I came to experience time as more gracious, more open, as others gave even more openly than I did. Maybe I need to practice a little more this week.

James’ text charges each of us to live with a generous spirit, to do so as a community, and to include the most vulnerable in our midst. James teaches that we can live a life of generosity because God first gives love and grace to us. In a moment, we will experience that grace revealed through communion. The eucharist is a tangible way we taste God’s love toward us. This table is prevenient grace in action. This feast feeds us with generosity so that we might in turn feed others. “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above.” Thanks be to God that we are so gifted! Amen.

We receive through communion—grace, mercy—ability to continue giving.