

“Repentance”

James 1:2-4; James 2:1-4; James 2:5 (NRSV)

**Community, Cross, and New Creation:
God calls us to love in action and faith.
How are we doing?**



This week, we turn to the book of James, bringing with us the three focal images central to this series: community, cross, and new creation. This brief homily was written by Jesus’ half-brother who became a leader in the early church in Jerusalem. Since James was martyred in the early 60’s AD, James’ teachings come from the first decades of the Jesus movement, before any of the gospels were written.

Though deeply theological, the letter of James doesn’t focus much on the nature or person of Jesus, but on what it means to live as disciples of Jesus. James, like Jesus, Paul, and the others, insisted on holding together the tension between faith and how we live. In the words of the old hymn, we are to “trust and obey.” James has much to say about the *doing* that must characterize the authentic Christian life.

Community

James writes to the community and urges them toward maturity and wholeness in Christ. They must endure many difficulties and trials (who doesn’t!), for it is through the tough times that faith is tested and deepened. Trials build character and they build faith as well. Further, because such difficulties bring us to deeper and truer faith, we can see the joy in them, for they bring us closer to our goal, our abiding life in Christ.

If we came to this isolated and alone, James’s words would seem hollow and even untrue. But we don’t face tough times alone, we live through them as brothers and sisters in Christ, encouraging and supporting one another. It is as a community, a church family, that we live out the implications of the cross.

Cross

James is not generally regarded to be a theological letter, for there is nothing said about atonement, justification, and so on. Even when it comes to the cross, James is focused on living a life that embodies Jesus’ sacrifice in every moment. And what, among many things, does the cross say to our community about how we are to live? Christ died for *all*. God gave his only begotten son for *all*. But how well do we really live this *all*?

That is James’s question in 2:1-4. Do we play favorites? Do we judge based on appearances? Luke Timothy Johnson writes:

In contemporary America, the “appearances” of race and gender are instantly recognizable, for they have, through titanic struggles, finally been brought to general consciousness. On these fronts, the church’s record has been mixed; despite some strong efforts toward genuine inclusiveness, racial and gender discrimination is still a reality within most denominations. The sort of discrimination of the poor person that James describes is less easy to see, partially because denominations tend to sort themselves out along socioeconomic lines. But to imagine a dirty and bewildered street person wandering into a Sunday morning fellowship seeking warmth and coffee is in most cases also to imagine a deeply uncomfortable fellowship...

The pastoral problem presented by a rich church donor who also wants to receive deference as well as the power to direct the church’s affairs is not new. The evidence is that the very first Christian communities faced the same tension; they needed the financial support of the rich, yet they lived within a value system that rejected the honor that patronage assumed as its due. Pastors in small and

great churches alike recognize immediately the powerful urge to cater to those few wealthy members on whom the financial stability or success of their particular congregation seems to rest.¹

New Creation

Even when James speaks of the new creation and the kingdom of God, he does so with a view to the poor, reminding us that those who struggle in this world will be heirs of God's kingdom. In this, he echoes Paul, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female: for all of you are one in Christ." James would simply add "poor or rich," "strong or weak," and "famous or unknown" to the list. What would you add?

The point is that in God's kingdom, which arrived in Jesus but still awaits its full manifestation, all of God's children stand shoulder to shoulder with one another, all of the divisions among us wrought by sin are washed away. And we are all charged with doing all we can in this life to make this real now, for all.

So how are we doing?

Though the word "repentance" doesn't appear in James, it ought to be watermarked onto every line, for it is a word of challenge. James calls us to a life of action, showing in ways large and small the love we are to have for God and one another. He wants us to be honest . . . how are we really doing? Are we ready to repent when we fall short of love's standard?

Understand . . . repentance doesn't mean merely to regret or apologize for our wrong. Repentance is about action, it is about actually living a different life and making better choices. Many years ago, I came across a wonderful metaphor from John Stackhouse that helped to drive this home to me (pun intended, as you'll see).²

Suppose we intend to drive from San Francisco, in northern California, to San Diego, in the far south. I insist on driving, since I've actually visited California once or twice and I never, ever get lost. You graciously concede the wheel, and off we go. The miles and hours go by. You begin to feel uneasy, however, when we pass what looks for all the world like a sign welcoming us to the state of Oregon. I insist that "Oregon" must be a region of California, and that Los Angeles surely must be coming up soon. As we drive through Portland, however, you are convinced I am heading in exactly the wrong direction. And as the Washington state line comes up, you become rather insistent on the point. In fact, you want very much to convert me to your opinion.

What is it, exactly, that you want when you want me to convert? . . . Surely true repentance is what you seek from me. Merely recognizing my mistake is not enough. I must regret that mistake. "I'm heading in the wrong direction, and I'm sorry." Then I must take further action. I must abandon the path I'm on (taking the next exit ramp); turn the car around by crossing over to the other side on the overpass; and get a new start (by getting on the entrance ramp in the opposite direction).

Suppose I do all this. Are you now satisfied? Have I fully converted? No. Not until I drive us all the way to San Diego, which was the point of the exercise. It's good that I'm properly reoriented. In fact, that binary move is indeed the essential move that has to be made if I'm first heading in the wrong direction. But turning around is not enough. Getting to the goal is all or nothing; it is also a binary matter. I'm not there until I'm there. Many theologians thus speak of conversion in multiple stages: repentance (recognition and regret), regeneration (a new start), sanctification (getting closer and closer to the goal), and glorification (arriving at the final destination). Full conversion is all of this.

For Stackhouse, conversion isn't one moment after which all is different, *but a process grounded on genuine repentance*, i.e., the concrete actions we take to become ever-truer disciples of Jesus. Conversion is the transformation that Paul speaks of in Romans 12:1-2: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 1994–2004, 12, 194–195

² John Stackhouse, "What Conversion Is and Is Not," *Christianity Today*, February 1, 2003

mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” We sometimes think of conversion the moment we put our faith in Jesus. In a way, that is correct. But conversion is also a process of transformation, by which we strive to be the holy people that God has made us into.

There is irony in this. The more we come to know Jesus, the more our own sin and failures become plain and evident, i.e., the more we comprehend the truth about ourselves. From what I’ve seen, those who are closest to Christ have the deepest awareness of the gulf that still separates them from the holiness of Christ. If you want to live in the truth of things, forgo the delusions of the world for the truth that lies in Christ. Such truth is the only way to genuine transformation.

Yes, we are to be doers of Jesus’ words, not mere hearers of them. But are we defined by our doing? We know what God wants from us: to love God and to love neighbor, all the time, without fail. A simple idea. But we also know that every day we fall far short of this simple standard. But we not merely disciples who fail to love as we should, we are God’s. We belong to God. It is in him that we find our truest selves. It is in him that we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). And it is through him that we can truly become the people God hopes we would be.

Daily Bible Readings

(More from James, Jesus’ half-brother)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday	James 1	Hearing and doing the word
Tuesday	James 2	Faith without works is dead
Wednesday	James 3	Taming the tongue
Thursday	James 4	Friendship with the world
Friday	James 5	The prayer of faith
Saturday	Psalms 51	The most well-known psalm of repentance