

# Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

**WHERE'S YOUR GOD WORKS? CHRIST HAS THEM!**

**Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17**

**Analysis by James Squire**

1My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 2For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," 4have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? 5Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? 8You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 9But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 11For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.

13For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. 14What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16and 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 is the good of that? 17So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

*NOTE: James is very long on Law and very short on Gospel, which is understandable since he was under the mistaken impression that his readers had accepted the Gospel. Unwittingly, he shows us what the law by itself comes to—it has nothing good to say about us. We are so pleased with ourselves (either because we are oblivious to James’ critique or because we become haughty with self-righteousness, thinking about all the “other” folks James is attacking). Either way, watch for Jesus to enter the picture surprisingly, via this Sunday’s gospel lesson, Mark 7:24-37.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Showing Disdain for the Benefits of Christ**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Showing Partiality–Dishonoring the Poor**

James has quite a startling flock on his hands. They act like they have faith in Christ, but their actions are nothing like what one would expect from a follower of Christ. It’s not just that they don’t do well enough; they do the complete opposite (and quite expertly). Their actions completely belie their words. They dishonor the poor (to whom God has given honor, vv. 5-6). Worse yet, they seem to honor those whom God dishonors, namely the rich (v. 7). Their words are as empty as their

actions are lacking (vv. 15-16). It is hard to imagine a more complete apostasy than that exhibited by James' readers. Hard, maybe— until we look in the mirror. Let's face it, "acts of favoritism" regarding rich vs. poor have been sown into the very fabric of our world. We defer politically and socially to the rich of our world. We encourage the poor by reducing our handouts (called "welfare") to them, and we encourage the rich by increasing our handouts (called "inducements to relocate") to them. There are compelling reasons for both actions, but James nevertheless has our world pegged: we honor the rich and dishonor the poor, in direct contradiction to God's choice (v. 5). We are supposed to be able to act freely in these matters, according to the law of liberty (v. 12), but we sure have a funny way of showing it.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *Judging with Evil Thoughts*

Such apostasy (in them and in us) provokes a prophet like James to attack our confession of faith (v. 1). Our faith is dead (v. 17), in fact it is mired in hell, so completely are we obsessed with making distinctions (v. 4) of who is worthy and not worthy of our attention. We make such distinctions because we revel in evil thoughts (v. 5); in fact we are evil, parading around pretending to be followers of Christ. If we are in truth devoid of real faith, then James is in earnest to have us know that we can not fake it with impunity.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** – *Convicted by the Law*

We presume to be free from the law, but as far as James is concerned, the law convicts us and we have no answer for it (vv. 9-10). Moreover, James refuses to bestow the grace of Christ on us. Though we may be oblivious to it, we are in dire straits. We have shown no mercy, hence God's judgment according to the law leaves no room for mercy to us (v. 18). Our fraudulent faith is dead (v. 17), and so are we without divine intervention. We

cannot begin to bring about our own faith because we are locked in the demonic grip of sin. We can put on a good show, but prophetic voices like that of James will find us out eventually.

*LINK: From James to Jesus (according to Mark)*

*This Sunday's gospel lesson features a couple of people locked in a demonic grip. The Syrophoenician's daughter was in the grip of a demonic spirit. She is a metaphor for the flock of James the Evangelist whose "spirit" is not only contrary to Christ's, but is masquerading as Christ's (the New Testament's word for this is "anti-Christ"). The deaf man by the sea could not hear and had trouble speaking. He is a metaphor for James' flock for whom the spirit of the gospel "goes in one ear and out the other" without so much as a single positive effect. Just as the deaf man had a speech impediment, so the public expressions of James' flock come out sounding very confused. Their words are gospel words, but their actions say the exact opposite. Their confession of faith is incoherent. Take heed, gentle reader. Does this describe you as well? Our confidence that we escape James' scathing critique may be exactly what James' readers were thinking when they read his screed. But fear not. "Mercy," says James, "triumphs over judgment" (v. 13).*

## **PROGNOSIS: The Destroyed Christ Brings Life**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *Christ Defeats the Law*

Into their and our world comes the Messiah, Jesus Christ, bringing the kingdom of God near, full of good news and enabling repentance (Mark 1:15). He cannot go anywhere without being held in the grip of those who are possessed by demons (Mark 7:24). The grace and mercy of God invade our world so completely that even if we are locked in to our "anti-Christ" behavior, we can be overcome by Him, just as the demons inside the Syrophoenician woman's daughter and the deaf man were overwhelmed by Him. By

engulfing our darkness into his own self, Jesus becomes the one trapped by our demonic spirit of rebellion. His presence among us makes us aware of how needy we are, and the demons within us grow scared. Life is in town, and death is on the run. The more Mark's Jesus walks among us, the more he is besought by our pain. He bursts on the scene in Mark 1, hitting the ground running, preaching good news and healing the sick. At the end of his journey he is tired, weak, and surrounded by accusers. He is overwhelmed by the sin of the world (our sin) and its punishment (our punishment). The evil that took hold of us and wouldn't let go has left us and latched onto him, bringing our death to him. He takes that death and gives us his righteousness in exchange. Not even James the Evangelist can keep this Jesus from overwhelming us with his sweet exchange, nor (I imagine) would he really want to.

#### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Partaking of Benevolent Food for Thought***

James would only remind us that Jesus remains an intense enemy of the kind of existence James preaches against. It's just that Jesus' approach is to take that sinfulness from us and put it to death on his cross for us. This is key, because we cannot begin to repair our fraudulent faith on our own. That's our real problem with James' critique. We think James is "killing us" with his words. But thanks to Christ's amazing exchange, his words are actually a joyful opportunity to renew our trust in Christ. James does not make this connection overtly himself. But Jesus refuses to give up on us, and his voice is audible in our lives (through Mark's gospel), reminding us that he has paid the price for our foolishness and entreating us to believe in him. His Holy Spirit is still active in our lives, sparking in us a renewed repentance and confession of faith. As James might ask, How can we turn our back on all this good stuff? This Christ continues to overwhelm our evil thoughts and deeds as we eat and

drink his body and blood in his holy meal. Eat up!

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** – *Seeing Christ in Everyone*

Having imbibed such marvelous sustenance and refocused our attention on Christ, the giver of that sustenance, we find that James doesn't bother us any more. We might critique his lack of good news, but we are not haunted by his attacks. Our attention, like the sheep in Matthew 25:31-46 has been refocused on Christ and those whom he honors (v. 5). We so speak and act as those judged by the law of liberty (v. 12) not because we are trying to, but because our faith has been made authentic by Christ and the Holy Spirit. We see everyone (like Paul in 2 Cor. 5:16) in Christ, and we see Christ in everyone, and in gratitude for such undeserved mercy shown to us "poor, miserable sinners" (TLH, Order of Holy Communion), good works naturally flow from our faith. Our good works do not make our faith authentic, it is our authentic faith that makes for our good works. Most importantly, such good works inspired by authentic faith therefore do not emanate from the world's faulty honoring of the rich. Instead of James hounding us, we might have the world hounding us, but the world can't get our goat the way James can. Being "in Christ" makes all the difference.