

# Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

## CULINARY ARTS

### Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)

#### James 1:17-27

#### Analysis by Jerome Burce

17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. 19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. 22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. 26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

## *Preface:*

*Now begin several weeks of munching on the epistle of straw. Luther's epithet for the Letter of St. James makes instant sense the moment one scans it for the sustenance that St. John calls the bread of life, namely testimony to the word and work of Christ Jesus. It isn't there, at least not overtly. Allusively, perhaps; tucked away, as in untold millions of subsequent Christian sermons, behind a verbal shorthand which presumes that everyone in present earshot already knows what terms like "word" and "faith" and "Lord" refer to, so one doesn't need to spell it out. And maybe that was so of that first set of folks who read James' letter; though I don't think it so of the mix of people I preach to in 2003. So as I tackle this text I'll take the necessary liberty of letting Scripture interpret Scripture, drawing on the deeper wells of Sts. Paul and John to fill in the stuff that James' shorthand suggests. I assume he'd approve. Woe not to me but to him if he doesn't. For if Christ and him crucified is not the take-it-for-granted presupposition of all that James would tell us, then his is not a Christian letter, nor dare we think to keep imposing it on the Church of God.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Half-Baked or Hard-Boiled—In Either Case, Unpalatable**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Stewing**

"At last!" says Ernie to Emma Earnest, the two settling into their pew and scanning the texts for the day. "Some real meat for a change. Look, a helping of Moses (Deut. 4:1-2, 6-9), a beefy Psalm (no.15). There's even a cut of Jesus on his high horse (Mk. 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23), and best of all, a nice thick slice of James telling it like it ought to be. 'Be doers of the word, not merely hearers' (v. 22). Chew on that, you deadbeats!" Do I exaggerate? Perhaps. Mock, I do not. Our present text

forbids it. So does ordinary human decency. Ernie and Emma are pillars of the Evangelical Church of St. James. They tithe. They volunteer. They appear without fail for the weekly serving of word and sacrament. They are models of Christian decorum as this was understood before baby boomers anointed self-gratification as a primary virtue. Talk with them for five minutes, and you know yourself to be in the presence of good people, honest, kind, profoundly sincere in the faith they profess, bywords of generosity. Can we do less than praise God for them (v.17)? Ernie and Emma are also tired. They wish they could pass the mantle of pillardom to someone else, but they can't imagine who'd pick it up. The younger folks don't give (Emma knows; she's counted offerings for years). They skip church too easily. By all accounts they draw their morals less from Bible and Catechism than from MTV, a worldly stain if ever there was one (v. 27). "It's as if they were never baptized," Ernie fumes. "It's high time Pr. Jim quit coddling them and started laying down the law!"

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *Turning Up the Heat—on the Wrong Burner*

Now Ernie and Emma are doubtless tumbling into a set of their own exaggerations as they spin their take on the younger set. Still, no one can argue with the essence of their complaint. It's all too obvious, everywhere we look: this gap between hearing and doing that the original Pastor Jim so memorably underscores. What's missing is the connector of faith—no, not the empty mind game that James will rightly rebuke next Sunday (2:14-17) but faith in the Pauline sense, that "living, busy, active, mighty thing" that Luther sings about in the preface of his Romans commentary (quoted in the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, IV, sec. 10;p. 552 in the Tappert edition). Call it trust. So what is it that merely hearing non-doers aren't trusting? "The word," says James. But which word? God's word, of

course—of which there are two, law and gospel, as St. Paul preeminently demonstrates (e.g. Rom. 3). So to which of these is James alluding? Ernie and Emma assume—as do almost all of us, almost always—that it’s the law word, the many “musts” and “thou shalt nots” that Moses hammers home in the Deuteronomy text. So they wait with anticipation for Pr. Jim to start scorching the non-doers with God’s tale of their nonperformance. Do they—do we—really think that this will engender trust and change behavior?

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Boiling Mad? Try Boiled Mad**

James himself tells us otherwise. “Your anger”—whether ours from the pews or Pastor. Jim’s from the pulpit—“does not produce God’s righteousness” (v. 20). Quite the contrary. It leads to things like unbridled tongues (“Those deadbeats!”) and deceived hearts. Take Ernie again as case in point. How much of his own youth does his muttering ignore (see v. 24)? Or notice how, as he assesses the folks around him, he’s failing to trust and do the word of God’s Gospel that he’s been hearing his whole life long. Snippy tongues and wayward hearts, says James, are signs that one’s “religion is worthless” (v. 26). The missing verses of the Deuteronomy text (4:3-5; why, oh, why were these omitted?) tell us exactly how God reacts to worthless religion. Check it out. Then notice how James, though still allusively, drives home the same point as he speaks of judgment without mercy to those who show no mercy (2:13). So what Ernie supposes to be meat for the shirkers turns out for him and Emma to be the worst of dinners, a great big helping of poisonous brimstone. Lest we forget, Ernie is me and Emma is you, the kit and caboodle of us boiled in our own non-doing stew. God help us!

### **PROGNOSIS: Well Done! (As In Sweet and Delicious)**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Call in the**

## *Caterer*

Help us God does. Yet again God sets before us ‘the word of truth’ (v.18). Take another look at that expression, this time reading it the way St. John would, as a pregnant euphemism for our Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:14, 8:31-32,14:6). This is the same Christ who, in the day’s Gospel, points us to the real roots of bad behavior (Mk. 7:21-23), his comments disabusing us of any last faint hope that Mosaic “musts” are the divine “implanted word” that will change behavior and “save our souls” (v. 21). But then saving souls is Christ’s job, isn’t it. What else can James be thinking of when he extols the “perfect” gifts from above (v. 17; think Christmas, or better still, Good Friday) or when he reminds us that God “gave us birth” (v. 18; think baptism)? Here then is the fabulous truth of the word called Jesus: that God “in fulfillment of his own purpose” (v. 18) gave him up to be boiled in the stew that our sin and anger cooked up to the end that even simmering Ernie might know God, not as the grim lord of darkness, but as “the Father of lights.” And since with God “there is no variation or shadow due to change” (v. 17) not only Ernie but the shirkers with him get to count on the “ultimate gift” of God’s fatherly kindness (again, v. 17; “ultimate” and “perfect” render different senses of the same Greek word). As James will tell us next time, “mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:13). That’s God’s mercy in Christ trumping God’s judgment through Moses.

## **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Saying Grace and Digging In**

And that’s the truth, the word that James now begs us to “welcome with meekness” (v. 21). A year ago last May “The Atlantic” published a marvelous take on the word “meek” by poet Mary Karr. Meekness, she argues, is not a condition but an attitude; not servility but a noble readiness to obey. (But see for yourself: “Who the Meek Are Not,”

<http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/poetry/antholog/karr/meek.htm> ). I find Ms. Karr convincing; so much so that I suspect “meekness” is James’ term for faith in the Pauline sense (see above, Step 2). It involves repentance, a turning away from “all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness,” by which let’s, by all means, include Ernie’s muttering impatience as well as the slackness of the folks he’s muttering about, both of which arise from dead-wrong judgments about which words a person can rely on. But even more will meekness entail a joyful reception of the word we can trust. Remember Luther on Christmas Eve? “Welcome to earth, thou noble guest.” Again, “Ah, dearest Jesus, holy child, make thee a bed, soft, undefiled, within my heart...” Notice how Luther, echoing James (of all people!), describes faith itself as a “generous act of giving...from above” (v. 17), the Father of lights acting by the Holy Spirit to “implant” (v. 21) the word of Christ. “Make thee a bed,” sings Luther; and so Christ will continue to do, so long as his Pr. Jims keep talking about him as the word for us Ernies and Emmas to trust.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** – *Cooking to Perfection*

All of which gets us to what James, I think, is finally driving at. There’s a difference between proud hearing and meek hearing; between the audience Jesus gets from St. Mark’s Pharisees (Mk. 7:5; they too are us) and the kind he receives from sinners who need him and know it. The latter, profoundly glad for what they’re hearing, act accordingly. How can they help it? Thanks to Christ they “look into the...law” and find it “perfect” (v. 25) as in completed, finished, and all wrapped up, its demands met and its judgments drained. How then can they continue to use it to impose demands and judgments on each other? Instead, Christ himself becomes their “law of liberty” (v. 25), that is, the basis of conduct that throbs with his own generous liberality toward “orphans and widows in their distress” (v. 27) and other

undeserving types. This would include shirking congregants who nonetheless had the faith to crawl out of bed this morning and hook up with Jesus in Word and sacrament. It also includes stewing Ernie and Emma. Watch as Christ bathes them all over again in the cooling water of his kindness. If only they'll hear and notice when, at the start of the service, the "excellent name" is "invoked over" them and everyone else (2:7), reminding one and all of their present identity in Christ as "a kind of first fruits of [God's] creatures" (v.18). Can those who hear such a word with meekness not do it? Will they not, with Christ, start cooking up a storm, a feast of good works that are "pure and undefiled before God, their Father" (v. 27? How else did Ernie and Emma become the churchly pillars they are? And will the Gospel, already so productive in them, not continue to keep them "blessed in their doing" (v. 25)? Will it not do the same for the saints around them? Your turn, Pastor Jim. Say that it's so.