

Come, Labor On!

“Dear friends, do you think you’ll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything?” (James 2:14, The Message)

Prov. 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Ps. 125; **James 2:1-10, 14-17**

Rev. Guy D. Griffith // Westminster Presbyterian Church
September 5, 2021 // Labor Day // 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Introduction:

The book of James has carved out for itself a special place in the New Testament, and that is because it is primarily a book of advice. It contains 60 imperatives in just 108 verses! That’s what makes it such a peculiar letter. But it helps if we understand that it is a particular kind of communication, “what interpreters refer to as *paraenesis*, or ethical exhortation, in the form of a letter.”¹ “Paraenesis” is derived from a Greek word which means “advice” or “counsel” or “exhortation” dressed up as a letter. It is ethical exhortation, that is, instruction concerning how one ought to live. This insight is crucial for one’s reading and interpretation, for the purpose of the letter then becomes clear: James is not trying to evangelize the world; instead he is calling its readers to live the Christian life.

In other words, the letter of James is not a missionary document, but rather an in-house memo for use within the church. Thus, it should come as no surprise that James does not lay out the whole of Christian truth because it is addressed to readers who have already heard the gospel and embraced it and who are already convinced of the central beliefs of the Christian faith.

And so, by the time we reach James in the New Testament, we have already heard the gospel. We are already familiar with the core theology and central tenets of the faith. But believers do not live by theology alone. No, the questions we ask are, what does this faith we hold matter and mean? What do we do? How do we live? James uses the Old Testament method of wisdom proverb writing to provide practical, pastoral instruction, which is why his book is sometimes called the New Testament Book of Proverbs. The letter not only bears similarities to with wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, but we also find strong parallels with Matthews Sermon on the Mount. Our text comes from James, chapter 2, verses 1-10 and 14-17. Hear the word of God.

2My 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

¹ Frances Taylor Gench, *Hebrews and James in the Westminster Bible Companion Series*, Patrick D. Miller and David Bartlett Series Editors (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 79.

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.

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.

Sermon:

Labor Day is one of those marker holidays. It marks the end of summer or the beginning of fall. I received a new appreciation of that when Amy went to Trader Joe's last week to stock up for a weekend trip with three of her college girlfriends. They are celebrating a significant birthday – you know, one with a zero on the end (though Amy's doesn't come until January) – so they're in a lovely VBRO north of Ashville for the holiday. Amy went to Trader Joe's to look for their fabulous pumpkin bread mix and was shocked to discover they don't stock any of their pumpkin products until after Labor Day. Who knew?

But this year Labor Day feels different. With all of the focus on the 20th anniversary of the attacks on 9/11 that marked our entry into Afghanistan and the sudden end of our involvement earlier this week, a spotlight has been turned on. Most of us remember with sharp clarity where we were twenty years ago when the Towers fell. I was flying home from Amman, Jordan after spending ten days exploring Biblical sites in that amazing country. We had a scheduled refueling and crew change in Shannon, Ireland and after about ten minutes on the ground we were told to deplane with all our carry-on. It wasn't until we were in the terminal that we learned what had happened. Hence, I spent an unplanned week in Ireland with twelve other Presbyterian ministers, most of whom were from DC. And while it was an inconvenience for me, it was a pastoral emergency for them, especially for my roommate who lost a member of his congregation in the Pentagon. Yet one of my most powerful memories from that time is how united we were as a country. All the things that define and divide us at this moment seemed not to have mattered then, and I miss that.

Of all places, the church should be the place where differences don't matter. After all we say each person is a beloved child of God bearing the *Imago Dei* - the image of God – and that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. Echoing Proverbs, James reminds us that "The rich and poor have this in common: the Lord is maker of them all" (Proverbs 22:2). But it is clear from James that the early church was having trouble keeping that straight.

My father had a phrase that he used that became almost like a Proverb for me to teach this lesson. Just before we'd enter my home church for worship he would always repeat in a heavy Welsh accent, parroting what I'm sure he heard my grandfather say countless times: "*God does not look at the hat but looks on the heart.*"

Now hats had pretty well gone out of fashion for men and women by the late sixties and seventies when I recall the exchange. No Homburgs, Fedoras, or Trilbys for the men; nor Pillboxes, Tams, or Turbans for the ladies sitting in worship. What did he mean by repeating *God does not look at the hat but looks on the heart?*

It reminds us that God's perspective is radically different than our own. God says through the prophet, Isaiah: "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways....For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts*" (Is. 55:8-9). My grandfather was a slater and a quarryman who came to this country alone when he was 16 and worked in every large slate and granite quarry on the East Coast from Poultney, VT to Tate, GA before settling in Slatington, PA. At age 50 he heard the Evangelist Billy Sunday and had a powerful, transformative experience that led him becoming an elder in the First Welsh Presbyterian Church of Wilkes-Barre' for the last 20 years of his life. He was, no doubt, sensitive to his social location, but knew that "*God does not look at the hat but looks on the heart.*"

That phrase came back to me powerfully during the year after the flood when we served as the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Center site. People from congregations all over the country came to help Nashville clean up the flood and stayed in the bunk rooms we converted from our youth space. They would often worship with us and it became to see folks coming forward for communion in blue jeans and tee-shirts, wearing work boots and carpenter pants. To me, it looked like the Kingdom of God.

Sometimes it is through suffering that we can move beyond the divisions to see our common humanity. There is a New Yorker cartoon that shows a man sitting at a table in front of a lemon press. On his left on the table are many jars, glasses, and jugs filled with fresh-squeezed lemonade. Over his right shoulder is a large tube out of which are flowing lemons that are pelting him, piling up on the table, and overflowing on the floor. He sits with his head bowed on the table his arms folded in resignation. There is no title, but the message is clear: it is all too much.

Many of us know that feeling. It is all too much: the COVID fatigue, the floods and fires, hurricanes and tornadoes, loss of loved ones. Our grief is real. We want to cocoon, sit on the couch and watch football. One of the seven deadly sins is sloth. But the ancients had a different word for it: *acedia*. What one modern interpreter has called the "sin of not giving a damn."²

² Laura M. Fabrycky, *Keys to Bonhoeffer's Haus: Exploring the World and Wisdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020), pp. 118-119. She writes:

"Several popular books have reintroduced the word *acedia* to public parlance, chiefly posed by Kathleen Norris. In her 2008 book, *Acedia and Me*, Norris explored how this once mortal sin of the church fell from that ignoble list, wrapped up into the sin of sloth. When Norris learned the word, learned about its history, she discovered how important it was to have the name of a condition she herself knew well....Careful to distinguish *acedia* from depression, Norris describes a soul that has succumbed to the temptation of *acedia* as incapable of '[rousing] yourself to give a damn.'

One way to grow compassion and empathy that some of our members have discovered is through prayer. This summer we studied Tish Harrison Warren's book, *Prayer in the Night* which was an extended meditation on an ancient prayer used in the service of Compline – the last of the daily offices. It runs:

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels watch over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.³

Praying the prayer slowly allows you to bring to mind and to God those in each of the several circumstances and situations. But it does more than that. It allows us to let go of our apathy and grow in our capacity to care.

Earlier in the week, when I saw the draft of the bulletin, I texted John Semingson, “What, no ‘Come, Labor On’ for Labor Day?” He quickly replied, “Would you prefer ‘ORA LABORA’? I’m fine with that.” ‘ORA LABORA’ – that’s the name of the tune of that old hymn, “Come, Labor On.” While not sung much anymore it was a favorite in my family and worked itself into my DNA. But talk about an odd name! It is Latin meaning “pray and work” and is generally associated with its use in the Rule of Saint Benedict. Benedict viewed prayer and work as partners, and believed in combining contemplation with action. It reminds us that faith and works go hand in hand, one cannot be without the other.

Come, labor on. Who dares stand idle, on the harvest plain
while all around him waves the golden grain? And to each servant
does the Master say, “Go work today.”⁴

My thoughts this week have been with my friend Chris Currie. Back in 2010 when the flood hit Nashville Chris was pastor of a small church in eastern North Carolina in the town of Calypso. A few days after the flood waters abated here and we started the clean-up I received a letter from Chris and his Session with a check for a couple of hundred dollars. The note said, “We were hit by a flood a few years ago and remember what that was like, so we wanted to send this so you know you are not alone, that we are with you in prayer and practical aid.”

Also see, Donald B. Capps, *Deadly Sins and Saving Virtues* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 12 and especially chapter five, The Sins of Middle and Mature Adulthood.

³ Tish Harrison Warren, *Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work, or Watch, or Weep* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2021), pp. 19-20.

⁴ *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), #719, first stanza.

This morning was supposed to be Chris' first Sunday to preach in front of his new congregation, St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian in New Orleans, LA. Because they can't meet in person due to Hurricane Ida, he sent this note to the congregation:

Hello, St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church Community,
In year 2001, I answered the call to ministry. In early September, I made preparations to pack my things and move to Princeton, New Jersey, to commence theological education. On September 11th, two hijacked airliners hit the twin towers in New York City, and on September 13th, I was making my way to seminary to that same region to begin ministry in a time of upheaval, crisis, and rebuilding. On Friday, September 14th, the seminary held a service on the national day of prayer. At the service, the President of Princeton Seminary, Tom Gillespie, mentioned that he thought now more than ever, it was a critical time to be entering the work of ministry and the task of theological education. Now more than ever, he declared, the world needs the church's ministry and pastors, chaplains, and repairers of the breach.

These are not the circumstances I would have chosen to begin in ministry with you, but that doesn't really matter anymore. What matters is that in the midst of all that is swirling around us, we continue to find ways to care for each other, to worship God together, to look out for our neighbors, and to find ways to stand with and to serve those in need in our community. In that sense it is the right time to begin this ministry and to enter into this common work together. Thank you for welcoming me and my family into this community; I am ready to join you now more than ever.⁵

I agree with him completely. A hurting, wearied, battered world needs God's people now more than ever. And here at Christ's Table of Grace we receive nourishment and sustenance to do God's work in the world. So come, the Feast is set!

Come, labor on. No time for rest, till glows the western sky,
till the long shadows o'er our pathway lie, and a glad
sound comes with the setting sun, "Well done, well done!"⁶

Thanks be to God for such work to do. AMEN!

⁵ Chris Currie, *The Quatrefoil: Weekly Newsletter of St. Charles Ave. Presbyterian Church* (https://myemail.constantcontact.com/The-Quatrefoil--Update-on-SCAPC.html?soid=1102142480661&aid=4JoQ2v6Ez8&fbclid=IwAR3ev8lhRpoS_54hNLAq9Im_6tk2P-G4Ph-pzo34rrmCIP7O-ilQ-AG8sP0), Tuesday August 31, 2021.

⁶*Glory to God, op. cit., #719 fourth stanza.*