



James 4:13-5:6
 FaithWorks: The Book of James
 Dangerous Faith

Rev. Brian North
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Last August when I planned this sermon series for right now, coronavirus was not on my radar screen. I'd never even heard of it. When coronavirus hit and we had to deal with this new reality, I considered changing away from James...but after prayer and consideration and taking another look at James I felt that its themes were relevant and applicable to our time and so I stuck with it. And so as most of you know, we've been in James since the middle of April.

Conversely, when I planned this series last August, I was certainly aware of underlying racial tensions and inequalities in our country. In fact, because of our family's bi-racial makeup, you can't be an adult in our family and not be aware of those things almost every day – and obviously it's even more prevalent for other families than it is for ours. But this series – with James' emphasis on putting what we believe into action – was not planned as some kind of response to race relations. I say that almost apologetically and as a confession. I'm not proud of my own tendency to ignore this problem and presume that *other* people will put their faith to work in regards to it.

And so in light of current events, I cannot read the letter of James and simply set aside or ignore racial inequalities in our nation, and I would be remiss as a pastor and as a Christian not to help us consider God's word in light of our current state of affairs. I urge you to consider this with me.

We see here a continuation of some of what he was writing just before this, which we looked at last week. **We have a tendency to make plans, but we can't control the future.** There's no guarantee that the plans you make for next week or next month or next year will come to fruition. We're living in a pandemic that has completely disrupted all of our plans. Our family had plans to go to the Lake Washington High School graduation ceremony tomorrow evening because our oldest is graduating. That's not happening. There's no senior prom, no senior party...all those plans are scrapped for us and pretty much for every other High School graduate around the country.

And: we aren't on this earth very long – we are but a mist, as he writes in verse 14. Other translations will say, “You are a vapor.” Our time on earth isn't much, in the grand scheme of things. So don't get too hung up on, your own plans and schemes and ideas. Instead, be sensitive to God's leading. Be open to the Spirit moving you – perhaps in a surprising or un-planned for or challenging direction. Seek God's will, as he writes in verse 16. Because God's will is right and good.

Then he gets to what is really a punch to the gut. He writes, **“If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do [because they've sought God's will] and doesn't do it, it is sin for them” (James 4:17).** This is the dangerous part about Christianity. Knowing what is the good and right thing to do is one thing. We turn to God in prayer, we submit our wills to Him, we make plans according to what we believe God is saying to us in prayer, and through His Word, and through other Christians who speak into our lives...somewhere in there God breaks through and makes it clear that “this is what we need to do.”

And: The dangerous part about Christianity is that if we don't do it, it's a sin. And it's not someone else's sin – it's *that* person's sin – yours and mine – whoever doesn't do what they know is the good thing to do. This is the sin of omission. It omits from our lives what God tells us we ought to be doing. And there's a lot of good to be done in the world. There are tons of opportunities to be God's hands and feet, to be salt and light, to love our neighbors, to be agents of hope and peace and grace and extend forgiveness, and help the poor and the oppressed and the marginalized...and the list goes on. We do these things in our homes, our neighborhoods, in person with our friends, on social media, in our places of work, in our churches, out in the community on our own, through our involvement in shelters and food banks and clothing drives and in our schools...I know some of those are limited now because of coronavirus: But there tons of opportunities to do the good we know we ought to do, and we do many good things as a church, and individually the members of Rose Hill do a lot on their own, too.

The problem is that some things that are good that we know we ought to do we pass up on because they are especially hard to do. It is SO easy to

ignore the good but really difficult things, and justify our ignoring of it because of the other good things we do which are perhaps easier. And again, those other things are good, and often are very needed. But sometimes we set aside the things that just seem “too big” or “too difficult” because they require more time and energy; some we’re afraid might alienate our friends; some are deemed “political”, some of them are really complex issues and we think a little good won’t have an impact; or we just aren’t real knowledgeable about or aren’t really sure exactly what the “good” is we can do – even though we know *something* needs to be done.

And according to this verse: **To sit back and *know* that there is a problem and *know* that there’s something good we could do to help bring healing, and *not* figure out what that is and do it, is a sin.** This verse – and there are others that we’ll look at in a few minutes – makes it clear that the sin of omission is real. And I will confess: In regards to race relations in our community and our country, I have not done all that I could have done. I have not spoken out on this issue as much as I should have. I’ve talked about it some in sermons before...but rarely, maybe never, in-depth like this morning.

Beyond sermons, I’ve never made a very public declaration against racism in our country until recently. The first time I really took public a stand – at least that I can remember – was a couple weeks ago when I was one of 192 white pastors here in the Northwest, mostly in the Seattle area, who signed a statement that we put in the Seattle Times, with all the pastors’ names listed under the statement. The statement was a show of solidarity with black people in light of Ahmaud Arbery’s death, including a confession of our collective silence as white pastors on this issue over the years. **Part of that statement was a commitment to actually *doing* something about racism; to stop ignoring the good that needs to be done.**

So I took seriously that commitment to do something – though my wife deserves the credit for coming up with the idea of what we did. Last Sunday night, Gwen and I stood on a corner on NE 85th Street here in Kirkland, along with some friends of ours, and we simply stood there in silence (**Picture**) each holding signs expressing solidarity with black people and expressing a commitment to help bring about positive change in our community and nation. It’s not much, and it’s not the end for us, but it’s a start. And it was a powerful experience.



If you question whether or not something *needs* to be done – and particularly if you’re not sure if *you* should do it – then I want to invite you to watch this video clip from Jane Elliott, a woman who has been working on educating people in an effort to eradicate racism and racial inequality since 1968. She puts it well in this video clip from a presentation she gave a few years ago...(**Video here, followed by sermon series graphic**) - for those reading this online, here’s the link to the clip on youtube:

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/xUlqTNwm-mk?autoplay=1>

It’s a fantastic call to action. In another clip that you can find on Youtube she makes an appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show – I think it was in about 1992 – and she made this statement: **“God created one race, the human race. Humans created racism ” – Jane Elliott.**

She’s right about both parts of that statement– though I might add that racism is straight from the pit of hell; that’s where it really initiated. In regards to God creating one race – Genesis 1 and 2 tells us that. We have a theology that goes back to practically the opening words of Scripture that *all* people are created in God’s image. And Christians, of all people, ought to be working to bring healing and reconciliation – because those are foundational principles in God’s Kingdom. Aren’t we the ones who pray, because Jesus teaches us to, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”? Do you think there are divisions in heaven based on the color of a person’s skin? No. God loves the whole world, and he does so much that he sent his one and

only son, Jesus, so that *whoever* believes in him would have eternal life. So let's help earth look more like heaven.

James continues writing, with a word against the wealthy. He touched on this subject earlier in the letter as well. It's a bit of a prophetic word that he's giving here, reminding us that our money won't save us. In fact, our money corrupts us. And it's another reminder for us in the midst of racial tensions that money – as well as power, and the two often go together – it's a reminder that wealth is a source of pain and division in our world.

The verse that really stands out to me in these few verses, is verse 4: **“Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty” (James 5:4)**. I can't read that verse without thinking about our nation's history of slavery and poor treatment of black people since it was abolished. The seeds of today's pain were sowed generations ago. Thank God that their cries have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. But have they truly reached our ears?

Oftentimes in Christianity, we emphasize the eternal facet of our faith and our relationship with God. But it's also about our relationships with others and putting our faith to work on their behalf here and now. James' letter reminds us about that frequently. We see it in today's passage, and we've seen it throughout this series:

- 1:22 - Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.
- 1:27 - Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.
- 2:14 - **What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? (James 2:14).**
- 2:17 - In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Paul writes in Galatians that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.” He writes in Ephesians

that Jesus is our peace, and that he “has broken down the dividing walls of hostility.” Jesus teaches the same thing in the parable of the Good Samaritan where one person helps another in his time of need – a life and death situation – even though they are completely different, even enemies at a certain level; Jesus teaches that the greatest commandments are to love God with all you’ve got and love your neighbor as yourself. (Video clip from Jane Elliott is a good test of whether or not we’re loving our neighbor as our self.)

Jesus teaches us about this “sin of omission” in the parable of the talents – where one guy takes what he’s been given and buries it in the ground while the other two guys invest what they’ve been given and are then commended a short time later, while the guy who buried what he got has even that little bit taken away from him. **This is the parable where the two guys who are commended are told, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21 and 23).** That is one of the most-quoted phrases of Jesus, with Christians frequently saying this is what they wish to hear God say to them in eternity. It’s a parable about putting our faith in action. There’s the parable of the lost sheep – where 99 are safe but one is lost and in danger. Jesus goes and looks for the one. Does it mean that the 99 don’t matter? Of course not. But the one that is lost needs help; needs to be rescued from danger. We could go on with further examples from Scripture like these.

The point is: our faith is one of action, especially toward those who are struggling, hurting, and in danger. They matter to God. Jesus took the ultimate action himself on the cross, where he gave his life because we all are in danger, and yes, we all matter to God. But people who believe that and put their trust in Jesus have been brought into the sheep-pen. We’re the 99; but rather than hiding us away in a sheep-pen, God sends us out just as the shepherd in the parable goes out to look for the one. **What is the action we’re taking to help with those who are still in danger, who are hurting, who are broken, who would benefit from us taking what God has given us and using it to benefit them?**

Being sensitive to God’s leading and recognizing the good we can do is an important first step. But it’s not enough. We have to act on that as James 4:17 says, and as Jesus teaches and models. Even though it’s hard work, I have no

doubt that that is in the Lord's will, as James reminds us about here. I don't totally know what that looks like for our church, but I'm working on it with others. I wish we'd done something a long time ago, and again I confess that sin of omission. But we can still make a difference, because there's a lot of work left to do. And in the meantime, you can put your faith into action on your own. You can work to break down the dividing walls of hostility, to come alongside our fellow image-bearers who happen to have different colored skin, who are hurting. We can be with them (we are with you, if you're the one hurting) in solidarity in their brokenness and their pain, so they know that they are not alone, that God is with them...and we are, too. Let's Pray...Amen.