

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Love Let Go

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If the whirlwind of life either stirs up enough clouds to obscure the way forward or knocks us down, we need to stop. We need to look for advisors.

Folklore tells of people climbing remote mountain tops to seek some wise sage. For all the venturing away from the world, and all the mountains I've climbed, I felt renewed, but only found a few mountain goats.

To understand how to live a good life, we don't need to escape to find answers.

Our best advisors lived through trials, like our own, and dispense wisdom from right where they are.

For their clarity and conviction, we turn to the genre of writing called "wisdom literature."

Proverbs, Job, a few Psalms, and portions of the Gospel of Matthew fall into this genre. They all describe life as it is – good or bad – just or unjust. Wisdom literature tells it like it is before instructing readers how to live happily. The Letter of James is one such body of writing.

According to first century standards, it bears very few markers of being a letter. It never mentions when it was written, specific recipients, or even who wrote it. Most scholars consider it a sermon that addresses the question “what does it mean to live as a Christian.”

With this context, please pray with me,

Dear God, we come to worship you and to seek your guidance. To hear you clearly, help us set aside our concerns, any of the anxieties or worries. Settle us. May your spirit sooth us with a wisdom that comes only from you. Amen.

James 1:17-25

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 God’s own purpose he gave birth to us 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 brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to

anger,²⁰ for human 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.

To make sense of our world, James pulls us back to the beginning. Echoing the creation stories from the Book of Genesis, this writer draws our eyes to the heavens. As if to say, if you want to find your path forward, allow yourself to be struck by the awe of this world you inhabit.

Remember that it was...and is... God who brings light into being. And it is God who hangs all the particular lights in the heavens. Without any shadow or variation, God remains the same today as yesterday, and will be tomorrow: God is the giver of good gifts.

Once James reminds us of who God is, the writer pushes us to consider, if our lives exist only as the fruit of God's generosity, how will we embody this truth and purpose given from God's heart.

James gets practical and asks us to imagine standing in front of a mirror.

Ordinarily, standing in front of a mirror might mean that we see ourselves as thin or overweight, blemished, disheveled, wrinkled, or scarred. If that is all we see, we may not understand, and therefore cannot accept the love with which God created us. If all we can see is someone flawed or possessing too little value, we forget who we are.

What happens when we forget? Life typically takes another course. If we cannot receive God's generous gifts, then life is reduced to a quest to get what we can while we can.

A scarcity mindset tells us that giving diminishes us and takes away from what we may have. And, that mindset corrupts us to see others as flawed, not worthy of any generosity, or worse yet, possible predators.

That's one way people live in the world, according to James.

Or, we can look at the world through the lens of God's word. Within the laws, and prophets, and stories of ordinary people who live in awe of God, we start to notice God's hand reflected in our own lives. When we see ourselves as people God blesses, we will turn with an excitement to find a way to do the same for others.

The Book of James gazes at the way things are in the world and tells it like it is. And tells us that God's fundamental nature is to love us.

James advises us to just receive this love. Let it flow into you. Let the love go in the way you live your life.

In the early twentieth century, John D. Rockefeller built the cathedral on the upper west side of Manhattan known as The Riverside Church. Captivated by one of the greatest preachers of the time, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Rockefeller let go of large portions of his fortune in the hopes people would fill a massive sanctuary, receive the word, and become doers of the word.

Fosdick, like the wise sage who wrote the Letter of James, observes human behavior. Here is a clip from a sermon:

Those who reflect upon their lives and conclude that they have received far less than they think they deserve tend to be among those from whom no great living comes. Those who think they break even, get what they believe they “earned” in life are people who rarely embody exceptional living as well. Those who readily reckon they received far more than they deserve are among those who indulge in great living.¹

¹ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Riverside Sermons* (New York: Harper, 1958), 174.

If all you do is hear the word, and ignore the call to do what God desires, you give no evidence of God's generous gifts to you.

Be doers of the word.

Where does this play out in our world today?

The gifts you give to Westminster, through pledges and other donations, fund everything from staff salaries to roof repairs to music.

You put cash in the plates we pass during worship. You text. You set up recurring debits to cards. ACHs transactions. Many of you use QR codes. Some send gifts from your IRA. Thank you for your gifts.

We dedicate a portion of your gifts to ministry programs to do Christ's work through hands-on service and generously giving grants to agencies.

This past year, we expanded the way your gifts impact lives, hoping to magnify our giving. The Outreach Commission offered the youth an opportunity to distribute \$10,000.

How often do youth receive the responsibility to spend \$10,000?

These tender souls began by asking, how do they experience God's word? Their inquiry took them beyond just reading scriptures and composing them into faith statements. If all they did was read, they would become merely "hearers" of the word.

Although they'd been giving of their time and labor in hands on work throughout their time at Westminster, they now asked the fundamental question: what does scripture call them to do with the gifts given by God to you...and that you give to God's church.

Among the vast needs, they prioritized homelessness, hunger, challenges for LGBTQ+ youth, disaster assistance, and mental health for youth. They focused on agencies that address these

needs in the Pittsburgh metro area, where they might also give of their hands.

People of God, when you receive God's generosity, flowing directly from God's own heart to you, and return a portion to the church, you become active in making the world kinder and more loving.

You become doers of the word.

When this church engages the youth in the weighty decisions to dedicate their time and these financial gifts, they learn by doing. As they learn by doing, with God's grace, they learn to lead the church into today and for tomorrow.

The way we do ministry at Westminster changes people's lives.

There are a thousand reasons today to clench our fists, defend our hearts and give in to despair. Even if the stock market is up this week, what about next? Do others deserve our gifts?

This line of thinking draws us further and further from God.

There is only one reason to keep a tender heart, an open hand and live with the courage to choose love. It is who we are and what we do for God.

Each time you receive God's generosity and let it go for others to receive, your heart grows. Each time you live generously, others learn by your example.

Let God love you. Let God's love go.



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