

biblestudy: february 2021

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

February 7, 2021 Text: James 2:1-13 “Dealing with One Another”

Personally, I prefer Scripture that gives me a place to hide from Truth. When it comes to God’s call on how to live my life, I like verses that can lead me to say, “Yes, I understand that, but another way of looking at that text is...” Then, I can hide in the possible second meaning of the text and excuse my sinful behavior. James 2:10 does not give me that escape room.

The writer of James understands where most of us slip up. Even though most of us have some good qualities, we tend to fail when it comes to equal respect for everyone (James 2:4, 13). How easily we develop favoritism based on education, physical appearance, social standing, or resources. (And, I suspect, it works both ways: the rich show little respect for the poor and the poor show little respect for the rich. There is enough Sin to go around!)

S. I. Hayakawa was a scholar of how we use language. He coined the phrase “ladder of abstraction” and encouraged us to “come down the ladder of abstraction.” In other words, avoid vagueness and get specific. The writer of this week’s study text study has done just that. He gives a real life example of the point he is making. James 2:2-4 describes a scene in early church gatherings; note the difference in how two people are treated when they show up at the door.

What are the differences in the ways we do and do not show respect of

others? There may be that inner mumbling as a particular woman walks up: “O Lord, not her again!” There may be the assumption “I know how those kinds of people behave.” There may be an internal arithmetic that figures “How will being friendly with him make me look good?” As I said in the first paragraph, this text does not give us any place to hide.

This letter is written to “the tribes who are scattered” (James 1:1, Common English Bible). Those who get separated from the core community of believers sometimes do not have the ongoing accountability that comes from being among others who seek to follow the Lord. It’s tough enough to seek to live a life of mercy (James 2:13), but James suggests that it is extra hard for those who try to do so without community support and challenge. We do well to lean into the grace given by participating in the healthy body of Christ, the Church.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn (*Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope* (Knopf) have written: “The morality of grace arises from the theological concept that everyone can be saved by God’s grace, even the undeserving, the uneducated, the jobless, the addicted, and the homeless.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Let me look with mercy, Lord...”

February 14, 2021 Text: James 2:14-26 “Faith and Actions”

Lent begins on Wednesday of this week. For many of us, this is a time for looking at ourselves in a spiritual mirror. James suggests that the reflection we see in that mirror ought to be faith alive in actions. The traditional language of the King James Version says: “Faith without works is dead...” (James 2:26).

Early Methodists took this so seriously that some naysayers looked on and accused those Wesleyans of trying to get saved by their good works. Charles Wesley penned these words to try to clarify the matter:

Let us plead for faith alone,
faith which by our works is shown;
God it is who justifies,
only faith the grace applies.

In the original printing of that hymn, the word “alone” was put in italics, making it clear that works are simply an expression (an application) of the divinely given faith.

Nevertheless, looking for good works is like taking the temperature of faith. A healthy faith expresses itself in acts of love and service and activity. A dead faith is one that has no actions (James 2:26), For a physically capable person, action may mean going places and doing things.

For someone who is physically limited, action may mean a steady life of prayer and concern for others.

(Sometimes we see good things being done by those who have no faith. In the tradition of our theological language we call that “the prevenient grace of God at work.”)

Martin Luther called the Letter of James “an epistle of straw.” He felt that it argued that we were saved by our good works. Luther said the emphasis in James lessened the value of being saved by faith alone. The words of the Wesley hymn quoted above (“faith which by our works is shown”) casts another view: the works, the actions, are simply an expression of the faith that saves.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Theodore Jennings, Jr. (*Good News to the Poor*, Abingdon) wrote: “...Wesley’s sense of the centrality of a transformed economics as being essential to the practice of faith.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord, this is not easy...”

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February 21, 2021 Text: Isaiah 58:1-11 “Godly Fasting”

Fasting is a spiritual discipline in many religious traditions. During Lent, some Christians “give up” certain things they usually enjoy: desert, alcohol, TV programs. Some make an effort to “give up” negative attitudes, prejudices, mistrust. This week’s study text offers Isaiah’s understanding of what God desires when we fast.

The prophet argues that fasting is not so much self-punishment (Isaiah 58:5) as it is service and witness (Isaiah 58:6-7). Fasting, one might say, is not so much “giving up” and it is “giving out” or “giving to.”

Some of the Isaiah text sounds like the appeal of recent times to fight for racial equality, social justice, and fairness for all (Isaiah 58:6). Some of Isaiah’s text sounds like the work of urban ministry, the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), rural poverty initiative, family therapy, and social services (Isaiah 58:7).

Oh, dear. I just noticed that the prophet also says we are to remove “wicked speech” (CEB), “the pointing of the finger” (NRSV), “malicious talk” (NIV), “speaking vanity” (KJV). Surely that was written just for people in his own day! Does God really expect us to stop blaming others and to do away with negative blabbering? Oh, dear. My fasting just got a little harder. What about you?

But there is good news. If our fasting is in the spirit described in this text, there will be light for our journey (Isaiah 58:10); there will be guidance for our decisions (Isaiah 58:11); there will be freshness to our lives (Isaiah 58:11).

The literal meaning of the Hebrew word for “fasting” is “to close the mouth.” Maybe we can come to understand this to mean more than closing our mouths to food, but also closing our mouths to self-serving claims, closing our mouths to hostile judgments, and closing our mouths to evil expressions. Such would be Godly fasting.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Introduction to Christian Liturgy* (Fortress Press), Frank C. Senn, a Lutheran pastor, has written: “There has been a growing interest in fasting. Fasting for self-care or personal gain must be distinguished from fasting that focuses on heightening the experience of hearing the word of God and receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion.... Fasting is not about ‘me’; it is about imitating Christ and serving the needy neighbor.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Holy Spirit, fill my heart with love to share...”

February 28, 2021 Text: Matthew 21:12-16 “Jesus Clears the Temple”

Although there are numerous rabbits to chase in this text (How did Jesus get the money changers to leave? Why does Matthew omit a line from Isaiah 56:7 “a house of prayer for all people?” With the money changers gone, how were people to get pure doves and temple currency for their offerings? Why were the chief priests upset that Jesus was able to heal some people?), I want to zero in on the closing verses, the children shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David” (Matthew 21:15).

What intrigues me about this circumstance is that it underscores once again how God uses the unlikely, the unexpected, to do God’s work. Who would have expected children even to be in the courtyard? Who would have expected children to be shouting the traditional greeting of the messiah? God is not limited by our human expectations.

I am left to wonder if God might be trying to tell us something now that we cannot hear because we do not trust the source or we do not respect the source or we do not expect anything of value from the source.

In Jesus’ day, children were certainly not expected to be the voice of God’s people. Herod didn’t hesitate to order the death of children (Matthew 2:16). Children were not expected to be in the temple (Matthew 21:15-16). Yet, Jesus remembered the promise of God from Psalm 8: “Out of the mouth of babes and infants, you have founded a

bulwark” (NRSV). Jesus said we must become like children and the kingdom belongs to people like children (Matthew 20:14). It’s hardly what one would expect.

So, what word from God am I missing because I do not anticipate God’s use of such persons? What gift does God want to give me through children? Through youth? What gift does God want to give me through a racial tradition other than my own? What gift does God want to give me from someone I have labeled “sinful”? What gift does God want to give me through the insights of other religions? What gift does God want to give me through the least, the lonely, the lost?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Justo L. Gonzalez edited *Voices: Voices from the Hispanic Church* (Abingdon Press), in which Ada María Isasi-Díaz wrote: “Divine revelation is always happening in the community and through the community because our Divine Friend is present when the community gathers.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Holy Spirit, and open my heart to new places, new people...”

Random Acts of Kindness Day

Feb. 17, 2021



- RANDOM

COURAGE

CARING

LISTEN

GRATITUDE

KINDNESS
- COMPLIMENT

INCLUSIVENESS

NEIGHBORHOOD

RESPONSIBILITY

INSPIRATION

MINDFULNESS
- NORM

INTEGRITY

CHALLENGE

RESPECT

ACT

R	I	H	L	N	M	B	H	D	M	O	S	K	E
N	E	I	G	H	B	O	R	H	O	O	D	I	A
F	E	S	C	H	A	L	I	E	N	G	E	N	E
D	N	S	P	E	I	R	A	T	I	U	D	N	K
A	E	S	E	R	N	H	M	O	N	Z	T	E	D
L	I	N	C	I	U	S	I	V	E	N	E	S	S
G	I	L	T	C	A	R	I	N	G	S	M	S	X
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F	M	E	N	O	I	T	A	R	I	P	S	N	I
Q	O	D	D	Y	S	L	M	O	T	I	N	L	S
E	C	N	G	I	C	S	X	C	Y	E	I	R	U
H	A	I	L	I	R	R	E	S	P	E	C	F	I
R	S	M	Y	H	N	C	O	U	R	A	G	E	Y

CAN YOU FIND THE HIDDEN WORDS?