

New Brew-James 11-18-2022_final

Sun, Nov 20, 2022 6:05PM • 1:00:52

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

james, people, jesus, author, text, faith, chapter, greek, scripture, book, writing, christ, words, sermon, congregation, quotes, person, new testament, poor, ideas

SPEAKERS

Tony Chvala-Smith, Josh Mangelson, Karin Peter, Charmaine Chvala-Smith

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Karin Peter 00:33

Welcome to "New'Brew", the *Project Zion* series that takes us through the New Testament by explaining, exploring and experiencing the text. Our guides, as always, through the New Testament and, for that matter the Old Testament, we did before this, are Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. Please tell me you're not going to do Restoration scripture next because I don't think I could do another couple of years, and I'm Karin Peter. So, Tony, Charmaine, Karin Peter. Before we begin, we'd like to remind listeners that you can view all of the "New'Brew" episodes and see Tony and Charmaine's slides, especially for the formation practices at the end, the experiencing the text part. That's really great if you can see those slides and use those in a formative way. And you can find those on the *Latter-day Seekers Ministries YouTube Channel*. So, in today's episode, we are still in the New Testament, specifically, today, we are looking at the book of James. And I seem to remember, it probably was you told me that when the New Testament canon was formed, James was not everybody's favorite. James was not a shoo-in to be in the canon of the New Testament. We'll find out why that is, as we go through. So, Tony, Charmaine, let's begin.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:49

Sure, well, we're happy to lead, this book is actually one of Charmaine's and my favorites to work with and it's not simply because of the Restoration connections to it. It's because it's a great book, and a great piece of literature, and really, powerfully, spiritually, and theologically and ethically.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:08

And, and it keeps surprising. That's one of the things I love about it. I came to it with one set of views, partly because of growing up in RLDS/Community of Christ, and then getting into the theological, thinking it was about something else. And then just most recently, just, it's like, oh, my gosh, there's,

oh, there's a whole 'nother theme here. How did I miss that? So, we're, I'm excited about getting to talk about this today.

Karin Peter 02:31

Excellent.

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:32

So, we'll start off in our usual manner where we talk about kind of authorship, genre, context, etc., the, the who, what, where, when, and why as much as we can. And we'll start off by saying, what is this text? Everybody calls it the letter of James. It's commonly called that only because the first line is a classic letter opening; person X to people Y greeting. But really, except for the opening, there aren't any other features in this book that indicate that it's a letter. Most scholars would say that this book is a sermon, or a collection of short sermons, or lessons. And one of the clearest ways you can tell that is that when you look at the Greek verbs, which I know sounds like a lovely weekend project, when you look at all the Greek verbs...

Karin Peter 03:17

All I hear us blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, when you say that, Tony.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:21

Exactly.

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:21

The predominant mood of the verb is the imperative, the command mood and so, so what we have here is an ancient sermon or collection of short sermons that have been woven together. It begins with a very general address to the 12 tribes of the dispersion. Now, since it's a Christian text, it's not being written to Jews. It's being, that's a metaphor for the author's readership who are imagined as the true Israel who are dispersed in different places. So, so that was probably added on later. This text originally was for maybe a congregation or a couple of congregations, and then was simply sent out, but it's, really has all the features of an ancient sermon. So that's the what.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 04:05

And I think one of the things I just want to mention, and as we've been working through for today's podcast, one of the things that dawned on me is, the misuses of James are often associated with that tone, that instructional tone or that imperative tone, giving commands or telling people to do something. And we just want to note that because once we understand why it was written, we won't hear this as a, you must do this, this, this and this, but that it's coming from a different place, that it's trying to help them in a part of their development that is lacking, and that it's not about, you know, people, you gotta get it right, but it's a, oh, my goodness, here's some ways to incorporate living Christ into your lives. Here's some things to question. Here's some things to look out for inside yourself. So, it's, it's really, I would say, far more invitational than it is instructional, but the tone of it is what kind of sets that, is why James is used sometimes the way it is.

Karin Peter 05:12

So, Charmaine, when you talk about that tone, what comes to mind is the difference in, in parental communication. So, you can get called on the carpet by a parent, where you know you're gonna get chewed out and sometimes Paul does that. You can hear it in Paul's letters, where he's calling people on the carpet and chewing them out. But this is more like a family dinner around the table kind of conversation about behaviors. And you know, in our family we...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:37

Right.

Karin Peter 05:37

...act this way.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:38

It's more like, I've noticed that you're having struggles with this. You know, would it be helpful to think about it this way? Or to think about Christ helping you with this or being an example of this. Yeah, exactly. That's...

Karin Peter 05:51

And it sometimes what's wrong with you? Don't do that, do this instead?

Tony Chvala-Smith 05:56

And, Karin, do you really want to do that?

Karin Peter 05:58

Yeah. Well, I do, but I won't if you're gonna make it an issue.

Tony Chvala-Smith 06:04

Well, let's go to the who the author, so identifies himself as James. And in Greek, that word is Jacob, it's not James. So, it's a, there are five different figures in the New Testament who have that very popular Jewish name in the first century. Traditionally, people have assumed that this was James, the brother of Jesus. Problems: number one, the author doesn't so identify himself. And then there's a variety of issues that call that into question. Number one, we know that James, the brother of Jesus, who became part of the early Christian movement after the resurrection, right, not during Jesus' lifetime, but, and then becomes, according to Acts, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, we know from outside sources that James, the brother of Jesus was, was murdered around the year 62, so that's still in the first generation, and this text has all kinds of markers indicating it's a second or later generation text. So that's one issue. The assumptions that the author has, that the author expresses, nowhere indicate that the author has apostolic authority in a, in any sense, right? The author doesn't say, James, an apostle, or James, leader of the Church in Jerusalem, or James, the brother of Jesus, doesn't pull any of those cards, but has some kind of localized authority among the communities that he's writing for. But he doesn't identify himself as, you know, like, Paul typically says, Paul, an apostle, I really am an apostle, right. And you just don't see that in the book of James. Another thing is that, if this were written by the brother of Jesus, one would expect a lot more direct quotes of Jesus's teachings. Now, there are some texts in James that show connections with the material in the Sermon on the

Mount, which is Matthew, but interestingly, when the author uses some of that material, he never says, "As Jesus said", or, "As the Lord said", or...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:13

"As my brother said."

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:15

Right. Doesn't, doesn't do that. And so, the Jesus tradition here seems, whatever the author has, seems to be oral, and seems to be kind of secondary. Clearly, the author doesn't have any, any Gospels in front of him. But he's, he's just quoting some oral traditions that sound like things we have in the Sermon on the Mount. And another reason that this text is difficult to assign to James, the brother of Jesus, is that it's clear that in the text, the author is trying to correct misrepresentations or misunderstandings of Pauline ideas.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:51

So, of Paul's teachings, particularly teachings about faith. And what we have here are some quotes that some of the people in this church or churches that James is writing to, they're, you're using some Pauline quotes and quotes from Paul, to basically say, "Hey, I have faith. I have the right ideas in my head. That's all I need."

Tony Chvala-Smith 09:14

I'm good.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:16

And James is going, oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. There's more. You're missing out on half of this. There's more to this than just having the right ideas. But it means it's far enough after Paul, that people have become both familiar with Paul's ideas about faith alone in Christ, and there's been long enough for it to be skewed for people to start misusing it or, or using it conveniently for their own purposes.

Tony Chvala-Smith 09:44

A few Pauline ideas have been sloganized.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:47

There's a good word.

Tony Chvala-Smith 09:4

Right, or they've been turned into little bumper stickers with no connection to Paul's context whatsoever. Whenever Paul talks about faith and works, it's always in the context of Gentiles becoming full members of the Christian community. That's not even in the, on the, on the radar in this book. So, in other words, this book's response to misrepresented Pauline ideas already suggested it's a later book, right. And then finally, writing skill. So, this isn't evident in English, but it is in Greek. This author writes very sophisticated Greek. If you take the 27 books of the New Testament, and you measure them in terms of the stylistic quality, grammatical quality, and so on, right at the very top is Hebrews, and then

comes Luke, Acts, and then comes James. It's right up there. And so, this, this author also is familiar with Greek rhetorical forms, like the kinds of forms a philosophical teacher would use in arguing a point. And this author even knows a few philosophical ideas. So, James, the brother of Jesus would have been an Aramaic speaking, Galilean peasant, or artisan. They may have known a few words of Greek to get by in the marketplace, but they knew a few words of Greek, probably, like I know a few words of Spanish. It's just barely enough to find the bathroom, right. So, it seems unlikely that James, the brother of Jesus, would have had any ability or access to the kind of education to write the quality of Greek that this text is in. And also, when the author quotes the Hebrew Bible, he quotes the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. So, so, all of these things have indicated to most scholars that James really is a later text in the first century. It can't have been written by the brother of Jesus. Is it pseudepigraphic, like 1 and 2 Timothy? Well, in that case, the author would have had to say, James, the brother of Jesus, right. But the author doesn't. The author just says James. So, we can say it's an unknown James in the late first century, or maybe the author is trading off the authority of James, the brother of Jesus. We just don't know. It's not clear in the text. And that's, that was just an assumption that helped get the book canonized in the, like, third and fourth century. So that's a bit about the who.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 12:04

Then the why, you know, why are they writing, and we've already said a little bit. There's some, some little slogans that are going around that need to be corrected. And sometimes people have set up James as though he was in opposition to Paul, but actually, he's reinforcing Paul's idea that faith in Christ is the first thing, but that action, then, is the second thing. But he's having to argue with their sloganizing of Paul's sayings, where it's like, hey, all you have to do is believe in Jesus, and you're good. And he's saying, well, believing in Jesus means it's going to affect more than your head. It's going to affect your heart and your hands and who you touch and who you're willing to hang out with. And so throughout this, this is lessons about how do you let your faith live. And so, this is, the setting is a group of people who, I would say, like many congregations, has a whole wide spectrum of people in it. And some of them are rich, and some of them are poor, and some of them are educated, and some of them are not. And they're letting the situation's, the societal judgments of people, hold sway in the congregation. So rich people are getting the best seats in the house, and a lot of attention, and the poor people are being put in invisible places and pushed out to the side. That the wisdom, those people who are smart or wise by their cultural standards, are being lifted up as being more important than those who have common sense and simple faith. So those are some of the things that are happening in the congregation.

Tony Chvala-Smith 13:51

It's also clear that there's actually marginalization going on in these communities. That is, people, people who are viewed as poor and less than are being pushed aside. And so, one of the things that James wants to do in this sermon is do a big reversal, right. And this is very akin to what Jesus did. "The first will be last and the last will be first." It's that kind of a thing going on in the letter. Something we can also tell about the setting is that it was very likely written for communities that were Jewish-Christian, right. And one of the ways we can tell is that this is the only book in the New Testament that refers to a gathering of Christians as a synagogue. That's in chapter two. Now, this is a place where the NRSV, I think, translates it "gathering". I think it would be better to translate literally. It's "synagogi" in

Greek. So, in other words, where would you say that? You know, Paul never calls Christian communities, synagogues. He calls them ecclesia, assemblies. But here synagogue would have been more common to use in an area where there was a lot of people of Jewish background...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:57

And where Christians may still be meeting in synagogues, still pursuing their full Jewishness, as well as being Christian.

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:07

The other thing too is that the author kind of circumstantially refers, in chapter five, to the early and late rains, and it's easy to gloss over that when you're reading it, but actually that describes the climate and how you grow things in Syria and Palestine. So, it's one of those little slips of the lip that say, ah, if you put that together, you know, that little climatological slip, together with the fact that the communities are being called synagogues, that the author is writing in super, super good Greek, it's pretty easy to locate this text and the community somewhere in Syria around the city of Antioch. Antioch was a highly Hellenized city. You could learn this kind of Greek in Antioch. And then also, there were lots of Jewish communities in Antioch. So, it seems like somewhere in Syria would be a good place.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:54

And it was, also, one of the early hotbeds of Christian development. So, it, kind of, all fits.

Tony Chvala-Smith 16:00

So, I think it's really important to keep in mind that this text is dealing with a community in which faith is being used to marginalize those who are viewed socially as less than. And once we get that, and we really, we can see this as a very powerful, powerful text.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:18

One more thing I want to add, and that is, we do know a little bit more about this author's relationship with the people that he's writing to, and this was one of those, "Ahas!", that just really started to turn around James for me, and that is that in this very short letter, it's five chapters, and they're not very long chapters, the author uses the term, "beloved", seven times. And it's things like, "Do not be deceived, my beloved", "Understand this, my beloved", "Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters." "Be patient therefore, beloved", "Beloved, do not grumble one against another". Your image of the round the kitchen table, or the din-, you know, family dining table, it really works here. Here's somebody who cares immensely, and he's trying to, to help direct them a little bit more carefully into a kind of faith that will persist, that will survive, that will go deep into who they are. So that just really, when I started finding, "beloved", and then next to these terms, like, "Don't be fooled. Don't be deceived," it's like, oh, my gosh, here's somebody who really cares about the people that he's writing to.

Tony Chvala-Smith 17:36

So, to sum up the explain, we have a really beautifully written text that's a sermon, or a collection of short sermons, that is addressed to communities that have turned faith into a bunch of ideas instead of into an actual practice of compassion, especially towards widows, orphans, the poor, and the marginalized. And we can date this text easily sometime in the latter third of the first century, perhaps

70 to 100, more like 80 to 100 would be a good date for us. So that's what we got. Let's go on to explore. We're gonna explore the text next.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:07

So, Karin, what questions do you have?

Karin Peter 18:10

Oh, well, several came up as I was reading through James. And James, it is kind of a favorite scripture for a lot of, a lot of people. And I'm like you, Charmaine, it's not so much the, the way the Restoration embraced it, and kind of translated it, and used it, but more just, it has a really pastoral sense about it, that speaks to me in a pragmatic way, much more than Paul does, which probably explains more how I feel about, he's not very pragmatic, where the text of James very much is. So, a couple of things. The first, when I was reading about this and what some of the scholars wrote, they refer to James as an advice letter. And so, I'm wondering if you've heard that kind of descriptor applied to James before and kind of what, what are we talking about? That sounds like proverbs, kind of.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:01

And that's because it is broken down into what feels like little lessons. And they each have a topic and they're a paragraph or two long. And again, it's that tone, that tone of instruction. And so, yeah, it's kind of, it's kind of an advice thing. But I think that's where, I would say, I'd say later in the experience part, this is one of the ways in which these passages are abused. It feels like power, right? It feels like power to use some of these quotes to tell people where they're wrong or where, what they need to do. And yeah, so it's almost this instinctual thing that people do with it. It's like, oh, this is kind of deliberately telling somebody something. I can use the scripture to get my point across. You know, I think this, you can use this scripture to force this on somebody.

Karin Peter 19:53

Well, that drops me down to a question I have down here that talks about, it seems like every letter that we have explored in "New'Brew", we are addressing some kind of division. So, it's Jew and Greek, the division there, and people using ideas and scriptures and teachings to divide people: the Divine and human. Was Jesus divine? Was Jesus human? The whole faith and works. Those are the controversies of the day, if you will. And it got me to thinking and reading James and how they've also been used to feed the controversies that we go through today. Should women have equal rights, or not? Should people have the ability to marry in same gender relationships, or not? It seems that Christianity has this natural propensity for these, kind of, polarizing divisions. Am I imagining this because of our current political climate, or what?

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:54

I don't think you're imagining it. I think that's, that's been part of the journey. But I suppose you could say, even a good marriage has divisions and disagreements. The question is how you deal with them, right. So, Christianity didn't start off as a Shangri La of perfection. In fact, even in the book of Acts, which does kind of paint a rosy picture of the early church in Jerusalem, still can't conceal that there were divisions and struggles there. So, hey, it's human relationships, there's going to be struggles. So, yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:21

But I think it does, and certain of the scriptures, the way they're written, are used, can be used in authoritarian kinds of ways, and so, when someone who has that bent already, there will be that tendency to leverage scriptures. And, and I think, this is a very short history lesson, you know, I think, with early Christianity, and we have seen it, we've seen in these congregations, a lot of diversity as far as opinion and worldview and socio-economic, and all that kind of thing, ethnic background, but once the church becomes the de facto state, because the Roman Empire is crumbling, and it's the strongest structure around, and so everyone's looking to the church, the church does become more authoritative in a state kind of way, in a ruling kind of way. And I think that, then, was hard to disengage, as Christianity than later does not become the only power. And as it diversifies further into Protestant groups, and you know, all the different groups. Some of that still got taken along as kind of a power seat.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:35

And I think one other thing that's important here just is to recognize that the New Testament itself is not a book, it's a collection of books. It, itself, is a diverse collection, right. There's four Gospels, and they cast Jesus differently. And, you know, there's the Pauline texts, but then there's the post-Pauline texts written in Paul's name. And so, our canon itself has diverse voices. And so, where there are diverse voices, there will be disagreements. And the question is, do you have some kind of lens to focus. In our tradition, Community of Christ tradition, we're going to focus on the: love God, love your neighbor, love your enemy, and do justice and love kindness kind of lens. That's going to be our central focus.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:14

And this book happens to have a lot of that in it. So that's pretty cool. Other questions?

Karin Peter 23:20

Yes. So, a womanist theologian, Margaret Aymer Oget, I think is [*pronouncing: Ah'-jet*] could be [*pronouncing: Ō'-get*], New Testament scholar from Austin seminary, wrote that in James, you get a sense of the femaleness of God, in some of the language that is used particularly in the descriptor of God as one who gives birth. But what do we say to that when we begin to think about who wrote this and what is being said?

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:51

Actually, we're gonna look at that, that very text in a little bit for a different reason, but yeah, it's a maternal kind of image of God giving birth, through the gospel, to us, to Christians. And, and then also, in terms of gender realities in the ancient world, "wisdom" is described in chapter three as peaceable, gentle, and so on. Now, I'm not being gender centralist here, I'm just saying that in terms of the ancient world, characteristics that were typically seen as those of the matriarch, or of the woman of the household, are assigned to wisdom, which is appropriate in Greek, since Sophia, in Greek, is a feminine gender term. So yeah, there's a little bit of that. And James, I think she's spot on on that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:30

And I think some of it you can partly attribute to the Jewishness of the author, those themes already very much present in the Old Testament. But also, again, this, the whole “beloved”, you know, this whole idea that I'm saying these things out of care, out of concern for you, out of your development and your growth as a person. So, yeah, I think that works really well. And to note it, keep paying attention to that, because it's amplifying a whole 'nother part of life experience for the hearer now, also saying that was valuable for the writer too.

Karin Peter 25:11

Yeah. Okay, last one. Piety. So, piety uses James, to a great extent. In the RLDS tradition, we were guilty of using James for the purpose of piety, and one of those is using James and other scriptures to model an example of what I call faith by avoidance. And I think we've talked about this before in the other settings, but the whole idea of bridling the tongue, or to not curse your enemy, has been reduced to avoid swearing, or...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:48

Gossip or...

Karin Peter 25:50

...using, yeah, using swear words, when in reality, that's not what James is talking about. So, are we going to look at that or do you just want to tell us what James is actually talking about? As a person who is known to unload a couple of curse words now and then, I really need to hear this.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:05

Well, so, this is a place where I would say that what we're seeing there, and the things that come before and right after, is this is about spiritual formation. James is full of spiritual formation suggestions, and this is one of them. One of the things about spiritual formation is to become very aware, aware of your own stuff, right? And become even brutally honest with yourself about the places where you've screwed up, and where you have harmed people with your words in this case. And so, he's talking to a group of people who are careless about their words, or their, as you'd see in the beginning of chapter two, they're preferring the rich person and the wise person, catering to their every whim. And what are they saying to the poor people? Well, they're dismissing them with their words. You sit over there by my feet, you know, it's over there, and so it's things like that. It's saying be aware, be aware of what your words are doing? Yeah, are, you know, and it's like, the wild fire that you see when a juicy bit of gossip takes on a life of its own, and that fire, but also the idea of the fire that we kindle when we are being self-righteous, right? And usually, that means talking somebody else down, putting someone else in a lower place. And so, so, it's all of these things. And it's about, hey, be aware. Be aware of how powerful this thing is. And you are as responsible for that and the feelings, and the things that you portray with it, as with anything else, as with your fist, or you know, your presence or absence. And so, I think it's saying, look at all the pieces of your life. Look in the mirror. You know, what is it that's wagging right now? And is it, what harm are you intending by it? Or what harm is it doing unintended? And so, I think, again, it's this whole, let Christ be in you. This is a place where there's room for some growth if you want to look at it on the positive side. This is something that will help your congregation if you contain your tongue.

Karin Peter 28:23

Well, and that's what we've been looking at in Community of Christ as we've gone on this journey from RLDS, which really was, in, just from my perspective, an expression of piety and kind of pious behavior, faith by avoidance, avoiding bad things and bad people, to this idea of forming ourselves in ways where we are trying to do good, and not do harm, and not, not be unaware of our, of our actions to the earth, to other people, to relationships, etc., etc.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:52

But not taking our thoughtfulness about our faith any less.

Karin Peter 28:56

Yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:57

You know, more and more thoughtful about it, but also then acting on it in more genuine ways, and not the avoidant ways.

Tony Chvala-Smith 29:05

Yeah, so you were referencing chapter three, where James has that great image of, basically, put a bit in it, right.

Karin Peter 29:13

Yeah.

Tony Chvala-Smith 29:14

Bridling the tongue. And he has this great image that the tongue is such a small member, but it actually, words can actually, like a spark, start a forest fire. And the problem sometimes is that we've been so afraid of using juicy words, right, that are just sometimes fun and colorful, but not very self-aware of the kinds of words that harm people. I have known church people in other universes, far, far from here, who probably never uttered a single curse word in their whole life, but whose words did great damage to other people. So that's what James is after, right. Words can hurt.

Karin Peter 29:52

Yeah.

Tony Chvala-Smith 29:53

So...

Karin Peter 29:53

Absolutely.

Tony Chvala-Smith 29:54

...watch that.

Karin Peter 29:55

Yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:56

And I think that if you look at chapter one, you're gonna see this whole list of things that are kind of spiritual formation pieces of this, and not spiritual formation in, ooo, you know, look at me, I'm being so spiritual. But...

Karin Peter 30:12

Wait, wait. There's another kind?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 30:14

There's the nitty-gritty parts.

Karin Peter 30:16

Oh, oh, oh, okay.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 30:17

I have to say, oh man, I really, really want to say that, but that's gonna harm this person over there and though I don't want to harm this person right now, I am choosing not to. I want there to be room for love.

Tony Chvala-Smith 30:29

Instead, I'll text it to Karin 'cause she'll laugh at it.

Karin Peter 30:34

Exactly. Where's my snarky friends? Okay.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 30:37

So, you know, you'll see, especially in that first chapter, these little ways of, it's like, how do you train your mind? How do you train your instincts and your feelings? And, you know, it's talking about rejoicing, you know, when rather than letting something tell you that there's no hope, you know, how can you use your mind, your mind and your heart to look at things in a new way, to, I say, have "Jesus eyes" on some things. So, in chapter one, these are a few verses that it has adapted commentary to it. So, you'd have to see whether you can figure out what's my commentary or what's *[inaudible]*. But, it's like when you face trials of any kind, don't whine and be a victim. Instead...

Karin Peter 31:26

Commentary.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:27

...instead, "Consider it joy because the testing of your faith produces endurance." And here it's talking about patience and strength. "And as that grows, you mature and are more complete." Another one. This is in verse five, "If you lack wisdom, don't moan about it and be jealous of those who seem to be

wise. See it as a chance to ask God yourself. After all, God is generous and wants you to grow in wisdom.” So that’s a little bit of a paraphrase. But verses nine and 10, this is one I have added extra words, because sometimes we skip over it, and I think this is so important to the whole letters. This is another one of those pieces. Not only is this about spiritual formation, this is about a reordering of the universe, and that’s what Jesus is about. So, it says, “Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up,” we like that part, “and the believer who is rich, boast in being brought low.” So, you know, this is the heart. This is one of the places where this author is revealing his hand. He’s saying, the way we understand value of people in this world is wrong. And here’s what Jesus did; lifted the lowly, and that’s all over in the Gospels and other places, too. But also, the rich should boast in having been brought low. And that would have been as startling for these people to be reminded of as it is for us. We don’t hear that read in sermons, especially if it’s just before the offering, so.

Karin Peter 33:09

We don’t want to offend the rich people among us, and have them stop giving. Yes, I understand.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:16

But you know, here, it’s the rich are invited to boast because they know now their value is not determined by their riches. What a gift, you know. So, others, “Blessed is anyone who endures temptation”. Really? It says, “...one is tempted by one’s own desire.” And so, if we endure or resist temptation, then we have to take a closer look at what are our motives? Where is that rooted? Why am I wanting this thing, or these things? What am I being lured and enticed by, instead of putting it off on the devil, or somebody else as being their fault? So how can I be more honest about where my temptation comes from? So that’s another one of those themes that runs through this. Don’t be fooled. Don’t be blind to your actions or your inaction. So, there’s a few more in the first chapter, but the bridling your tongue was one of them. If anything, they are “...religious and they do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts.” Again, there’s that deception, don’t be self-deceptive, “then their religion is worthless.” So, it’s saying self-deception also comes by not acknowledging the damage we do with our, our words, not just with our actions. So yeah, so there’s, there’s a whole bunch there that’s pointing to this idea that this is about spiritual formation, and not about being able to meditate on the spur of the moment, but this is about spiritual formation as being formed by where we let the Spirit...

Karin Peter 34:51

Yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:51

...make us look in the mirror, and how the Spirit offers to help us when we want to give Christ more room in some part of us.

Karin Peter 35:00

It’s a really good text, I think, that we could use on the Sundays when the theme has to do with our Enduring Principle, Responsible Choices, because it really is a call to act responsibly as a disciple.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:12

Absolutely, absolutely.

Tony Chvala-Smith 35:12

Yeah, yeah. This sermon, we're calling James, is really an extended sermon on personal and communal responsibility. You can, you can treat it that way. It's very, how do we be responsible to each other in Christian community? So.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:29

And here's another spiritual practice, is to notice, you know, not only to notice what's happening in you and what you're doing, but to notice what's happening in the congregation, to be open to what the Spirit will help you see or feel. So, it's about noticing,

Tony Chvala-Smith 35:45

James, chapter two, verses one to about 8, where James describes a scenario in a congregation, a scenario I've, I've seen something kind of like this where...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:55

And that will be in the experience part.

Tony Chvala-Smith 35:56

Well, I don't say too much, but we get there...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:58

I already did.

Tony Chvala-Smith 35:58

But when we get there, you'll, you'll see what it is. It's a, James uses the word, the Greek word is, prosopolepsia, which means receiving the face. In other words, it's paying attention to appearances, i.e., discrimination. This is a book that critiques discrimination. And so, I think there's lots, lots to learn from him. So, we love James so much that we've got, like way, way, lots of notes. So, pardon us for stumbling around in them a little bit. This text is really important. This is the one that the womanist theologian might have been referencing. And I gave it a heading, "The Gift Precedes the Task." Here's the thing. Everybody loves to go to James, to canon following about faith without works is dead, blah, blah, blah, and then say, "See, it's not about grace. It's about what you do." Well, no. This is in chapter one, James says this, "In fulfillment of God's own purpose, God gave us birth, by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." Word of truth, elsewhere in the New Testament, that phrase is used to describe the message the apostles are preaching about Jesus. But notice, this is definitely a maternal image, God gave us birth. But notice that this is James's way of talking about grace. We didn't give ourselves birth. We didn't birth ourselves into the Christian faith. We didn't convert ourselves, however you want to put it. This is God's action, and God birthed us into this relationship with Jesus Christ so that we would become new creatures, first fruits of his creatures. That's a Pauline image, actually, and thus, we are to live in a way that corresponds to the gift. But if you turn those around and say, the task precedes the gift, then you've got all kinds of problems. That is not what James is saying. So, you have to read chapter two in light of this statement in chapter one. The

divine gift of, whatever you want to call it, divine gift of grace, of salvation, of call, of placing us in a new community, that always underwrites anything we are supposed to do. And then second...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:06

So, we can't work our way into God's good graces.

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:07

Right, right.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:09

Darn.

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:10

Darn. We can't show God our spiritual resume and say, "You owe us something, God."

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:16

And so, not only do the words in James reinforce that, but also the images that he's using and the whole, all of these things. It's, it's not about us being perfect. He's acknowledging that nobody in that congregation is perfect. And they all have a little bit of growth that they can do. So, you know, I think that's an important piece to remember.

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:37

And by the way, in chapter three, James calls himself a teacher, and he says, we all make many mistakes with our words. So, even James claims that for himself. Second thing, Charmaine referenced this already, I title it "Temptation Comes from Where?" Well look, listen, this is really interesting. "No one when tempted, should say 'I'm being tempted by God', for God cannot be tempted by evil, and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it, then when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin when it is fully grown, gives birth to death." Alright...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 39:10

That's really pleasant.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:12

It is, but this is actually really brilliant psychology, right? Temptation does not come from external sources. In patriarchal settings, you often hear men say, well, she shouldn't have worn that. Well, that's BS, right. Temptation comes from within, James says. It's, it's our own desires we've not been self-conscious of or self-aware that are at work in us. And so, James is saying that temptation lies in our own inner landscape, and not in some external force, whether God, or the devil, which James refers to the devil just once in the book, but you can't blame it on anything else. Temptation comes from within. We are tempted by things we want because we are unaware of our wants. And I think that's pretty darn good psychology, really. Fascinating stuff. And then a couple of other things just before we go on into experiencing the text. In the background of the ethics of James is the Hebrew prophets. This text is a social justice text. And the late Raymond Brown, who was a great New Testament scholar, writes in his

Introduction to the New Testament that James is the most socially conscious writing of the New Testament. It has deep links to the theology of the Hebrew prophets. Especially, James shares their passionate critique of those who abuse the poor, abuse the powerless, like widows and orphans, those who neglect them, and those who discriminate towards the impoverished, and also chapter five, wealthy landowners who withhold wages. Well, ouch. That's never stopped happening, right. And so, this is the kind of language that you would find in the Hebrew prophets, powerful social critique that's going on James. So, and then, finally, one other thing is that James refers to wisdom in chapter three, and he appeals to his readers in chapter three to seek the wisdom from above, right, i.e., divine wisdom. And this wisdom is different from the wisdom from below. Think of the wisdom from below as conventional wisdom, right. You know, if you do good, you get good, or those who work hard and pull themselves up by the bootstraps have earned everything they've got. We've, have all kinds of conventional wisdom that guides our lives, for good and often for ill. But James is saying, that's not the wisdom we're seeking. We're seeking the wisdom from above, which is different. It's peaceable, gentle, it guides towards peacemaking. This is all towards the end of chapter three. But be careful of conventional wisdom, because divine wisdom often runs quite contrary to it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 41:43

Yeah, and one of the things that he's doing, where he's calling people to action, to act on their faith, but he's really careful. And this is something I hadn't seen, again, until we've been, just this last couple of months, relooking at James, but it's not in a pietistic. You know, piety is not a bad thing. It's when it becomes self-righteous, right, that it becomes that and so a pietistic way, maybe, of, if you're thinking of James as a set of rules, if you're following James' rules, then you would give to the orphans and the widows, but you could do it with a very condescending way, if you haven't read James, because James is not about, oh, aren't we so good, because I gave \$1 to this person and didn't even question where they might use it. Well, how good of me, and because what's run through the whole letter is this sense of equality, this sense that we uphold each other's dignity and worth. That's what this lifting up is. It's not about lifting up financially, or, or saying the nice words that say, oh, yes, I respect you, but I'm not going to act like I respect you. So, you know, he's just calling people to being honest. And that's one of those places is, don't let your care become another way that you put yourself in a higher position of power or privilege. And, and it's, it's just chipping away at these two senses of value that people have re-inherited from the culture. They're saying, oh, oh, yes, this Jesus stuff is really nice, and it sounds good, and it's life changing, but then they've kind of slipped back into this, well, but, in day-to-day life, well, you know, we know that we have to treat these people in a, in a different way, because that's just common sense. And, and we, you know, we're going to be uncomfortable, smelly people. And that's okay because, you know, that's, that's how our culture is. So, it's, they're slipped back into another way of being, and he's trying to call them back to say, no, no, no, no. This is, this is a radical, countercultural way that Jesus led. You can do it. You've been doing it, but you're kind of, you're slipping. You're getting comfy. So, that kind of leads us pretty well into the experience, part, the looking at the scripture in a different way. And we've already talked a little bit about one of the things I really wanted to note, which was that the scriptures from James can be used in harmful ways, and they have been, and it's because of that prescriptive tone, that teachie, teachie tone. But now, you know, that, I just love that image of sitting around the table, and people caring about each other, and, you know, let's, let's talk about our lives. And James is saying, yeah, here's something that might be helpful to you. Here's another way to think, another set of ideas to put in your head so that when you're looking at this thing,

you might respond differently, so, you know, I think, the prescriptive tone. People can come to someone who has a problem, and rather than spending time with someone who's struggling, it's like, oh, James, I can, I can quote this thing to them, you know, and I can still keep my distance and be very generous with my knowledge. So, it's like win-win for me, you know? And so, it's things like, well, "if anyone lacks wisdom...", you know that, that idea? Well, you just...

Karin Peter 45:18

Like sending thoughts and prayers, and then you go on and do whatever you're doing, yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 45:22

Or, you know, someone who's struggling. Well, you know, it says, whenever you face trials, to consider it joy, and then, and then walk away, yeah. Or, you know, resist the devil, and he will flee from you, you know. It's, all those kinds of things get used as these little pat, here's what you need to do, and then everything will be fine. And I don't really want to touch your mess, you know. I don't want to be that involved in your life, is the bottom line there. So, you know, there's these different ways that it's been used. And well, and the other thing that passages from this book get us for, I would say, I know people who've been spiritually clubbed to death by some passages, you know, things like for the doubter, "...being double-minded and unstable in every way. You must not expect to receive anything from the Lord," you know. So, the people who are willing to ask questions, you know, this gets used against them. Or, "Therefore rid yourself of all sorted and rank growth of wickedness," you know. It's kind of like, well, you just have to get that out of your life, then, and then things will turn around. Or "Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded." There's no beloveds in there. These are intentionally chosen to judge somebody, and often using cultural judgments, but using scripture to do it, because we feel uncomfortable. And so, as we're approaching scripture today, we see them as written by people. But we want to explore what's going on with the writer and the recipients, and we've been doing that. In James we see a group of people who are too comfortable with their faith and they want it to be easy. And James is saying, I care about you too much to let you go that way. They're letting their culture determine who will be and who will not be important in their group. And that's the main thing he's challenging. Because in the group, the rich matter, and the poor don't. Those who appear to be wise are important, and being compassionate is not important. So, it's kind of trying to bring a balance. So, the writer is inviting them to let Jesus's way of being in the world soften them, make them vulnerable to each other, to not be above or condescending. But you will hear in James, if you start to listen, this invitation, this invitation to go deeper in your spiritual life. So, as always, we see experience part to see if there's something that the writer or the intended recipients are experiencing or thinking, that might also be helpful to us in our relationship with God and the world. So, we will see what we can find that might be helpful. So, here's the passage that we've made reference to a couple of times already. So, James 2:1-17, "My brothers and sisters..." and it's been, I've taken, adapted it a little bit to make it fit, "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For 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, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while the one who is poor, you say, 'Stand there,' or 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, 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? But you have

dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith, but do not have works? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them..." you're in my thoughts and prayers. No. "Now, go in peace. Keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." So, it's a wonderful little picture that we get, a little snapshot of the struggles that this group is having. So, I'm going to just encourage us to think about those places where, in a very James fashion, to think of those places in our lives, where we may bring judgment on other people, using the, the cultural norms to do that. After all, for most of us, we know how to treat people that we'd like to be seen with, right? So, we easily welcome them and find them a nice comfortable spot. But like those described here, we might not be sure how to address or interact with a poor person or a filthy person who may or may not know how to act at church. You know, I think some people don't realize how much that pushes their buttons, how, that people don't know how they're supposed to act, you know, what kind of a face they're supposed to put on at church, and they make us uncomfortable. And all people, but sometimes church people even more, don't like to be uncomfortable. And, you know, they want to have this church, be this sphere, where they know exactly what to do and how to behave, and how to look the way they want to be seen. And so, here's these people are making us uncomfortable, for goodness sakes. So even though church is supposed to be a place where this different world and Christ is present, this author is just pointing so absolutely on target to this place where they've not done that. They're not willing to do that, or they haven't seen that they're leaving behind the Christ way to fall back into what society says about who's important and who isn't. So, they haven't made room for Christ's reign of peace, or to affirm the dignity or worth of all. So, here's a way we can start with, and in some ways, this is what the author of James is, is doing. He's kind of saying, try imagining what Christ would have done in this situation. And to go a little bit further, how would Christ have welcomed both of these people? Take a minute to imagine how Jesus would have welcomed each of them? And who would he have spoken to first, in his pattern, in his life, or to employ that? Who might have he spoken to first? And how would he have welcomed each person? And then who would he have chosen to sit with? I think that's an interesting image for us to think about. And so, as we, we look at this story, we can begin to see that faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. This is not about a theological debate about whether faith or works matters most. It's an invitation to make faith meaningful in the world, by noticing and intending what comes, what flows from our faith into our words, into our actions. So, let's do an experiment in our heads and hearts. So, think of an uncomfortable situation, or relationship you've been part of, that makes you as uncomfortable as the people in the scripture are with that poor, dirty person. So just take a minute. Think about a situation where you've been as uncomfortable about somebody as the people in the, in the story were, and write it down. Just need a sentence, just to remind you what we're going to focus on. All right, so what feelings do you associate with this situation? And just jot those down. Is there discomfort, embarrassment, fear? Are you noticing prejudices from your past? Or what arguments do you keep rehearsing in your head or heart? Well, they should have known better than to do that? Or why couldn't they dress properly? Or, whatever it might be. Think of your situation? What arguments do you keep rehearsing in your head or heart, maybe to maintain that comfort? All right, then ask yourself, where in this situation am I relying on my society's eyes of judgment? And perhaps that is based on economic status, idealized personality traits, you know, like, well, he should be more confident, or she should be nicer, or those kinds of things; disability, level of success, incarceration history, political views, addiction issues, religious affiliation, appearance, mental health struggles. Which of these things might we be using as we look at

that person that made us so uncomfortable? And to note those. And so, then a couple questions. Who in the situation do I need to see in a new way, with Jesus eyes? And, how is my faith encouraging me to act in a way that may or may not be comfortable? And then, just invite you to take a few minutes to see where these questions might take you. And take some time to write down what is helpful. So have fun with that.

Karin Peter 55:44

That is not fun. That kind of reflection information is not fun, Charmaine.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:51

I guess our quest for fun is just different from...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 55:53

It's just I care so much. I want you to go there. But I think that has just been so exciting to me to see that this person, whoever wrote this, really is wanting people to start sorting out what really is this Jesus way? And where am I superimposing the convenient, societal judgments? And what does it look like to let my heart be broken for people, to be compassionate, to touch the person who makes me cringe? Good questions.

Karin Peter 56:29

Okay, so on that important, but not fun, contemplative experience there, and hopefully, not just contemplative, but transformative experience, when we look at people through the lens of Jesus that James outlines. I think we've gotten the point that James is a letter that is more than a couple of quotes that we can toss out and use, based on our Restoration history, or simply on the way scripture can often be used in our culture, that it's a treatise really on responsibility as a disciple. And, and I think reflects many of our Enduring Principles and what we talk about in Community of Christ, and challenges us to actually be those things that we talk about as Enduring Principles in Community of Christ. So, before we close our discussion of James, do you have any last comments or last thoughts about the book of James that you want to share with us?

Tony Chvala-Smith 57:29

If you take James really seriously, then equality in a Christian community means that some are going to have to come down, and others are going to have to be raised up. That would be fully constant with what's going on in James, that would be real equality.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 57:45

And I would say, before you read anything, or use anything from James, preface it with, "beloved."

Karin Peter 57:53

All right, so we've talked a lot in Hebrew about how pieces of scripture are pulled out of context and used in ways that are harmful. So, our closing quote today is going to come, actually, from the black abolitionist, and writer, and thinker, Frederick Douglass, who actually quotes some ideas from James for a different reason. He's calling out people who are using pieces of scripture to discriminate and oppress others, as you can expect. And I found this from that same New Testament scholar that I

quoted earlier, Margaret Aymer Oget, from Austin seminary, who is a person of color and quotes Frederick Douglass in, a paragraph from a speech, that was entitled, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July." And here is what Frederick Douglass said, "Ministers who uphold slavery, make religion a cold and flinty-hearted thing...It is a religion for oppressors, tyrants, man-stealers and thugs. It is not that 'pure and undefiled religion', which is from above, and which is first 'pure, then peaceable, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy'". So, I think that encapsulates our experience with James from today pretty well. And with that, I will thank you both for continuing to be our guides through scripture, and we hope our listeners will join us for our next episode in which we'll be looking at...

Tony Chvala-Smith 59:56

1 Peter.

Karin Peter 59:58

Of course, 1 Peter, excellent. And until then, I'm Karin Peter. I'll be 2 Peter for that, since we're looking at 1 Peter. I'll be with Tony and Charmaine for our next episode. This is "New'Brew", our exploration of New Testament scripture. Thanks so much for listening.

Josh Mangelson 1:00:25

thanks for listening to Project Zion Podcast. Project Zion Podcast is a Ministry of Community of Christ. The views and opinions expressed in this episode are of those speaking and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Community of Christ. The music has been graciously provided by Dave Heinze