

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 13, 2015

James 1:17-22, 26, 27

Birth from God for Religion God Accepts

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Dearly loved by God in Christ Jesus,

Families today are scattered. Some literally are scattered from coast to coast across the United States, or even across an ocean. This describes the Christian family that was the early church, scattered among the heathen nations. These Christians were subject to many trials, and persecution severely tested their faith.

James, the Lord's brother and apostle, wrote his letter to encourage them in their faith, and admonish them for their shortcomings in Christian living. We can see why the Holy Spirit inspired James to write as his letter lives on to encourage and admonish us and future generations.

Over the next four weeks, selected readings from the Epistle of James will be our second lesson. We begin in chapter 1 and look at our **Birth from God for Religion God Accepts**. God gives birth through the word of truth. That birth means seeking the righteousness God desires.

Here is the key that unlocks and opens it all. "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created." "He" is "the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." The Father of the heavenly lights gave birth to all the planets and stars that fill the sky night and day. Even as they change and come and go and cause shadows, our God the Creator of the heavens and the earth always remains the same.

The Father remains the same in his giving and in his gifts. This is important to know. "Every good gift" literally means ever good giving. The act of giving is good so it does not matter what is given. Think of a nurse giving a painful vaccine shot to a child. The shot hurts but the giving is good. "Every perfect gift" is just exactly what I need when I need it, even if it hurts. It is the complete gift in that sense.

Here was the Christians' encouragement and ours. God the Father does not change. He always loves in his giving and in what he gives even when it hurts. Nowhere is this changeless love more evident in the giving and gift of our new birth in Christ Jesus.

The Father has given us that birth "through the word of truth," through the gospel. He gave us birth through the eternal decision of his will to bring us into his family. God has created and continues to create his church just as he created the universe. One of my favorite passages is 2 Corinthians 4:6, "For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ."

The early Christians were the "first fruits" of God's harvest of souls. First fruits in a harvest were the promise of more to come. We are the more to come. There still are more to come as we continue to share the word of truth with others.

God our Father does not change with the times, does not change with the changing sky. He does not change in his will and power and love to give sinners the new birth of faith in Jesus Christ through the gospel in Word and sacrament.

Before James goes on to write about what that birth means for our lives as Christians, he wrote, "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this." That thought looks back to the birth the changeless Father of the heavenly lights gives us. It looks to the good giving and gifts we receive daily, especially our forgiveness and faith. With that view in our eye of faith, we see also that birth means seeking the righteousness God desires.

We may understand "the righteousness God desires" in two ways and they are intimately connected. First, God desires us to cover ourselves with the righteousness of Jesus Christ which he accomplished by his perfect active obedience of the law. It is the righteousness in Christ's blood that covers our sins and washes away sin's guilt and power. Secondly, that righteousness God desires is our right living guided by his holy will. It is our living what we believe. It is the fruit that our tree of faith produces. James emphasizes in his letter that you cannot have one without the other.

God the Father gave us birth to seek both those kinds of righteousness. James strongly warned the Christians, and warns us, against what hinders and prevents us from seeking those. Simply put, it is sin. James more detailed list includes closing our ears to God's Word, too quickly arguing against that word, and the anger that ensues. Instead, "be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry because human anger does not produce the righteousness that

God desires.” A person won’t listen to God’s Word and hear it when they angrily are arguing against it.

The “moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent” hinders seeking the righteousness God desires. We are to “get rid” of it, throw it off. When I was at the Sem I worked in a dog food factory around turkey carcasses and rotten eggs. Before I could come into our little apartment above a farm house I had to take off my reeking, stinking clothes on the porch. To seek Christ’s righteousness through faith and live righteously in that faith, I need to throw off the reeking, stinking immorality and wickedness of the moral filth surrounding and attacking us.

There is a positive side as well. Just as I keep myself from “being polluted by the world,” my “religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this; to look after orphans and widows in their distress.” Righteousness God desires and religion God the Father accepts manifests itself in Christian charity. Righteousness and true religion is not just avoiding the evil. It is doing good out of faith. It is helping one another in selfless love just as Jesus Christ helped us out of eternal damnation by being our Savior on the cross.

The Christian family may be scattered around the world. But over us is God the Father of the heavenly lights who is changeless. He has given us the good gift of redemption and salvation in his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Through the word of truth we seek his righteousness that has reconciled us to the Father. This word encourages our faith in Christ, and motivates our living for Christ. Amen. <SDG>