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Alexandria, VA 22310  
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Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23  
James 1:17–27

### **A THIRD PEW TYPE**

We neglect the book of James. Maybe over the years, Luther's caution about this book—his opposition to its message of faith is, in fact, related to actions—has somehow infected us. But here we have in James a member of Jesus' own family encouraging us from the street of Jerusalem. First century Christianity.

The church today is more likely to identify with first century Christianity than any time in its history. We have more in common now with that culture which faced such opposition to the truth that was revealed by Jesus, and this word of truth about being spiritually alive—this discussion of rebirth—than we have had in the past. Heart renewed and given new meaning is one we can neglect no longer if we are to be faithful.

How many of us came into this sanctuary today just brimming over with spiritual vitality? We came in here today with our backpacks full of concerns and worry. Enough worry for today and tomorrow. From time to time, I think we all—I know we all suffer from a listless faith. We pray and we study. We learn, and we come into this room to praise God, but for some reason we do not go out energized or purposeful. We come in and we go out unchanged.

James tells us that what threatens our rebirth can be found in the way in which we treat the liberty we've been given. Somehow we think that to speak the truth in love means we don't have to care for another person's feelings. Somehow we think that meekness is weakness rather than strength. Somehow we have come to look in the mirror, and we have recreated God in our image. James tells us what threatens our faith. We are not so willing to admit the source of our spiritual lethargy.

It is, however, quite clear. Did you catch the strange turn of words in that verse 17? "...there is no variation or shadow in God ...." Let me put it another way: We receive the gift of grace, and immediately we begin to make excuses for not trusting that grace completely. We look for a shadow side of God's gift. We are like people who have received the greatest treasure in all the world, and we cannot imagine living into that treasure.

This weekend, along with all the funeral news of Edward Kennedy, the news media also told us about two lottery winners—the largest in U.S. history. Two people who would split \$332 million—\$166 million for each one. One on the west coast, and one on the east coast. Imagine winning \$166 million, even after taxes. That would be enough to change your life. Now imagine winning so much and becoming distracted to the point of never redeeming the ticket. Imagine putting off acting on claiming for yourself such an amazing reward.

I encourage you to go back to the book of James. It is well written, and it puts before us time and again truth about who we are. Verse 17 is repetition of what James says in verse 5. If you lack anything, God urges you to ask. God gives all ungrudgingly, generously, if you will just ask.

Okay. I want you to be able to take something concrete away from this worship experience today. Look at what we've just read. Go home and read it again for yourself, and see if it doesn't boil down to an old proverb. The fifth verse says don't be double minded about God's gift of grace. How do we say it? Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.

And isn't that what we do with God's grace? We second guess. We look for the down side. If it's possible to find ourselves lacking in any way or lose our sense of purpose, that is what we do. James words and the words of Jesus in Mark are pushing us—encouraging us to start anew.

In a book encouraging the Scottish nation to claim its faith again, to conquer the unbelief that has taken over church and their culture, Harry Hutcheson illustrates what he calls the "gospel of the well constructed pew." He refers to an old ad from an Indiana wood crafting company which offers two types of church pews. One type has a back which is sloped forward ever so slightly from vertical, about 3-1/2 inches. The other type of pew has a back which is sloped backwards from vertical, a full 5 inches. The first pew offered is dubbed the Catholic slope—easier to move to the kneeling bench. And unfortunately, the second type of pew advertised is referred to as the Protestant slope, illustrating our tendency to recline spiritually as we come into the church, when we receive the good news about God's grace. Some of you want to check it out right now. Go ahead. Take your hymnal, set it on the pew and look. You're leaning back 5 inches or more.

I think we need a third type of pew. A type of pew that encourages us to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. The type of pew that will offer us the opportunity to become midwives for the birth of God's liberating love for us. We need a pew which makes it easy for us to separate ourselves from the false religious observances, the empty piety that we are just as prone to create as the Pharisees and the Scribes did, as the first century Church did when they ignored the needs of one another, which prompted a member of Jesus' family to write the book of James.

We need pews where you're hearing faith; you're hearing your spiritual condition when I talk about where we sit in the sanctuary. We need faith which allows us, in the words of Mark, to clean out our hearts. We need a faith which says enough with mere lip service—enough with teachings that make us prone to pray and then never to act on those prayers, life styles which abandon life-giving renewal and rebirth in favor of our own sins—our own set of rules.

Mark is very clear, isn't he? Go back and read the words of Jesus. Can he be any more blunt than he is? When we make our own rules, here is what our society will look like.

He says it will be obsessed with sex, and dishonesty, and infidelity, and insatiable appetites, and wicked actions, and deceit, and licentiousness, and envy, and slander, and pride, and folly. Sound familiar to you? All the things that sell—all the things that are advertised as a substitute, all the things that threaten our commitment to one another and the good news of the gospel.

We need a faith which only God can offer us. One which lifts us out of our seated positions and makes us rise to the very prayers that we offer each week and hopefully each day—prayers which will cause us to get up and follow where Jesus is leading this church.

Before we lose sight of where he is leading, let us remind ourselves. “Come, you that are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.”

Notice he said *you* did these things. You didn’t write a check to allow somebody else to do it. You didn’t send somebody in your place, but *you* did all these things. And thus you knew the meaning of the kingdom of God alive in our midst.

When God’s word is so compelling that we change our priorities, we are close to our Savior. When grace is more valuable than winning this weekend’s lottery ticket, then grace will forever transform this community. When we make up our minds to trust God no matter what, no matter the news, from family or the doctor, no matter the news from the economy or from our job, we will trust God. As for us, as for our home, we will serve the Lord. This is the faith which moves us from the pew. From our belief, from what we value, and actually allows us to spend time considering the needs of our neighbors. This is the good news the world longs to hear. This is the gospel which will redeem us today and always. Amen.