

BURN-IN

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James 2:1-17

I am holding in my hand a check which I am going to place in the offering plate. It is a personal check from me which I have written made out to First Presbyterian Church in the amount of \$100. This is not part of my pledge; it is donation for the organization called Rise Against Hunger. This money will go to feed people. If I gave the \$100 dollars to you and said 'take some folk out to eat,' how many people could you feed? If you went to a nice restaurant, you might be able to feed five people. If you go to Chick-fil-A you could purchase 29 of their basic chicken sandwiches. If you hit the McDonalds dollar meal... you can do the math. However, I can beat that. This \$100 will feed 1764 people. How does that happen? I will tell you, but I also need you to help.

On Saturday, October 6—four weeks from now—I will need 50 people to commit to gather at the church from nine in the morning until noon. You can be any age—from the smallest kids up to as old as you want to be. On that morning, we are going to assemble 10,000 food packets. Each packet will feed six people. We are going to package sixty-thousand meals. These meals are simple. They consist of rice and dehydrated vegetables. We will include a nutrition/spice packet in each bag. To prepare the meal, the user will pour the contents of the packet into a pot, add two liters of water, and cook for twenty minutes. I've been told that different cultures augment the dish with their local spices.

The food we package that day will be placed on pallets which will be put into a container and shipped to where it is needed—places of drought or flood, or conflict—Haiti, Honduras, India, Syria, South Sudan, and more. We will be informed when our food reaches its destination.

Each food pack that we create costs 34 cents. Because we will be making ten-thousand of them, we also need to collect \$3400 (now \$3300).

Why are we doing this? Because people are hungry. And Jesus commands us to *feed the hungry*. If we have faith, then we must respond by obeying Jesus' commands and doing something. Lip service is not enough.

For the previous seven weeks, I have been preaching a sermon series on the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah. If you are a close follower of my preaching, then you have probably noticed in the past that when I conclude a sermon series, I somehow manage to continue referencing that series. The reason is simple. After living with a certain text for a period of time, the lessons of that text become ingrained in me and I begin to see the world through the lens of that text. After being immersed in these texts, I can't just quit them cold turkey. Whatever I preach

next will be influenced by these texts. That is how it should be. Scripture is holy. It should change us.

Today is no exception. We've completed Ezra/Nehemiah, but I hope the lessons we grappled with in those stories stay with us. I hope that my sermons have stuck with you. I hope these texts continue to color our view of our world.

Ezra and Nehemiah tell us of the rebuilding of Jerusalem following Judah's defeat at the hands of the Babylonian armies in 587 BC. It took them nearly 150 years to get the city back to a sense of normalcy. The title of my sermon series was "Building God's House" and throughout that seven weeks I posed the question "What is God's house?" Is God's house the temple in Jerusalem? Yes, it is, and rebuilding the temple was the people's first major undertaking. But even though the temple was restored, the city remained broken. Nehemiah pointed out that the people in the city lived in fear and disgrace and so he sought to rebuild the city walls and gates to afford the people a sense of security. And he did. A temple requires a community and if the community is broken then it cannot fully serve the temple. But when the city was restored, the people realized that their relationship with God was damaged and so they then turned to the scripture and committed themselves to *walk in God's law*. What Ezra and Nehemiah teach us is that God's house is not the temple or the city but the people. God lives in them as they live with God.

In our reading for today we take a huge leap across the New Testament to the book known as the Letter of James. Little is known about this particular letter. James identifies himself only as *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*. The letter is not addressed to a particular congregation but to *the twelve tribes in the Dispersion*. James is clearly not writing to the Jews since the twelve tribes of Israel ceased to exist after the invasion by the Assyrians in 721 BC. It is most likely that he is describing Christians as the spiritual successors of Israel.

In the first chapter of this letter, James offers ethical teachings to his readers. He encourages them to accept trials and persecution as a test of their faith. Most of all, he encourages his readers to practice their faith. He says, *Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves*.

In chapter 2—our reading for today—James confronts the reality that believers do not always follow this command. First, he poses a situation. Imagine, he says, that you are gathered in your worship assembly (we would say imagine you are sitting in church), and two people enter the room. One is clearly well-to-do. You can tell from their gold rings and fine clothes—maybe it's the Rolex watch, or the Armani suit, or the Hermes scarf, or the Louis Vuitton bag. The second person to enter the assembly is wearing dirty, stained, torn clothes and is obviously not just poor but at the bottom of the social ladder. How do you treat these people? To Ms Vuitton do you offer them a prominent, comfortable seat? And to the poor person do

you point to the back corner saying, 'You can stand over there,' or even worse, 'You can sit on the floor...next to my feet.' When we do this, James argues, even if it is just in our heads, we become *judges with evil thoughts*. We are not following the law of God.

James argues that just being poor does not mean a person is incapable of loving God and being rich in faith. And he poses this question, 'when has a poor person hurt you?' The rich, he says, they are the ones who oppress you; they are the ones who will drag you into court; they will trash your good name. Why then do you treat them with favoritism? How should we treat the rich and the poor? By following what James calls *the royal law—You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. Showing any partiality is a sin.

We are called to follow God's law, not just part of it, but all of it. We can't pick and choose. We can't claim, as James says, for example, that we have not committed adultery so murder is okay. It doesn't work that way. If we fail to keep any part of the law, we *become accountable for all of it*. We are to both speak and to *act as if we are being judged on how well we love our neighbor*.

Our faith, as James might say, should be burned into us. Think those old television sets and computer monitors that displayed the same image for days or weeks on end. Eventually, the image would burn into the screen. After that, everything on the screen would have this ghost image. Our faith should be something that people see when they look at us. Our works should be the ghost image that colors all that we do.

Although it is part of the New Testament, the Letter of James has been controversial. Martin Luther, the great Reformation theologian, did not like this book at all. He referred to it as an "epistle of straw." Luther's objection was based on James' emphasis on works. Luther interpreted James to say that we can earn our salvation by doing good works. If we do enough good things, then God will be forced to welcome us into the Kingdom.

It is true that James does emphasize works, but he does so as a response to faith, not in place of it. James asks this question, *What good is it... if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?* For James, faith does not exist alone. And he cites an example of someone who is naked and hungry. If a Christian says to them, *Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill*, and yet does nothing to actually assist them, James says that is pointless. Faith must be accompanied by works. Works are a response to our faith. If we have faith, then we will be compelled to do works.

Our church is undertaking this project to create 60,000 meals so that we can say, "Go in peace, eat your fill," and have it mean something. By feeding the hungry and healing the broken we are being doers of the word; we are building God's house.