

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family**Title: True Devotion****Lesson: James 1:17-27 NRSV**

I'd like to introduce the letter of James today. Verse 1 reveals who wrote the letter: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings." James wrote the letter of James. One interesting thing in preparing today's message was that there is still a lot of controversy about the author of the letter because the name James was very common at that time. In the Bible, there are five Jameses. Two of them were disciples of Jesus. One of them was Jesus' brother. (Mark 6:3, Matthew 13:55) In addition, two other Jameses appear in the Bible. So, some scholars argue that the letter was written by James, a disciple of Jesus, while others maintain that it was written by James the brother of Jesus. It is not known which of the James wrote this letter, but the author of the letter was an influence on the 12 tribes. He was the leader of the early church along with Peter and John. He was also a believer in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as he confessed himself as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15:7, it says that "Then Jesus appeared to James..." Many people followed Jesus, but until Jesus died on the cross, was resurrected, and appeared to them, they did not understand the resurrection and salvation of Jesus, and even his brother James also did not believe in Jesus as the Christ until he experiences the resurrection of Jesus.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, however, when he appeared to Peter, James, and his disciples, those who experienced his resurrection no longer doubted, and came to believe in that Jesus is their savior and Christ.

James wrote the letter to the 12 tribes who believed in Jesus Christ and were scattered in many areas because of the persecution against Christians at that time. So, they were always careful and risked their lives because of their faith in Jesus.

During the worship service of the early church, there was a time to greet each other, hugging and kissing on the cheek like the time of the passing of the peace of Christ in our worship service because there was no guarantee that their friends, brothers, and sisters who worship together that day would be able to worship again in the near future. During the time of the passing of the peace of Christ, we only share the peace signs now due to Covid-19 but after the pandemic, I pray that the day will come soon when we can greet each other walking around and sharing warm handshakes and hugging each other.

At that time, it was not easy to keep faith in Jesus Christ due to the persecution of Christians. Most of the early church members were poor, anxious, and experiencing trials. To encourage them, James wrote his letter to the 12 tribes. In his letter, he emphasizes faith based on action.

At that time, there were the elite groups: Pharisees and scribes. They believed that the law gives salvation. They offered sacrifices, kept traditions, and kept the law, but their actions lacked love and faith in God. Even though they read the Bible all day, prayed for a long time, and made offerings, their actions made themselves arrogant and conceited because they judged and condemned others who did not do like them.

About this, James told that "...Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls." (21) Meekness means to obey the will of God. How can we receive salvation? Where does salvation come from? Reading the Bible gives us salvation? Praying a lot of time gives us salvation? Offering a lot of money and helping others give us salvation? No, they don't give us salvation. Salvation only comes from Jesus Christ. Of course, reading the Bible, praying, offerings, helping others are really important, but that is not the essence of salvation. God has opened the way of salvation through Jesus Christ, and anyone who believes is saved. Therefore, there is no action or effort that we must do to be saved. This is a lesson we can learn from the parable of the prodigal son. (Luke 15:11-32)

The son wasted his father's fortune and eventually returned to his father, but his father warmly welcomed him. The prodigal son did nothing to get into his father's house except that he returned to his father. Now all he has to do is live as a child of his father.

Likewise, God has opened the way of salvation through Jesus to all who believe in him. There is nothing we should do to enter the kingdom of God except to believe in Jesus Christ. And what we must do after becoming children of God is to live on this earth as children of God.

The important thing here is to live on this earth as children of God and children of the Father. It is not our actions that save us, but faith in Jesus Christ that saves us, but those who believe to be children of God read the Bible, pray, do offerings, and help others. We believe that we are children of God, right? Then, we must live as children of God. If we believe that we are God's children, but do not live as the children of God, today's scripture says that it is not true devotion. Then what is true devotion? It is to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (27) Caring for orphans and widows is just an example. In other words, true devotion is to love our neighbors as the children of God.

Then, who are our neighbors? For some, it can be family; for some, it's next door; for some it's in the same town; for some it's church members; for some it's people in Wisconsin; for some it's people in the United States; and for some it's people in Haiti who are suffering from the damage of the huge earthquake; for some it's people in Afghanistan. Taking time in your day to pray for the neighbors you care for, giving them warm words, words of comfort, and words of love, and if there is anything you can do for them, please do that because it is caring for neighbors, living as children of God, and true devotion.

Finally, I'd like to introduce a part of Charles Wesley's sermon: "Show your faith in good works. Without these, all pretensions to faith are false. These are the necessary effects or fruits or signs of a living faith. Necessary they are, not to justify us before God, but to justify us before others; or rather, not to make, but to show us acceptable; not as the cause but as the evidence of our new birth; not as conditions, but consequences and tokens of our salvation. The faith that does not work by love is an idle, barren, dead faith. It is no faith at all." (CW Sermon on 1 John 3:14) Amen.