

What Does It Profit?

James 2:1-17

INTRODUCTION

"That's all very interesting, Reverend. But what did you have in mind for us *to do*?" This unexpected question was directed at two of us who were conducting a worship service in a mental hospital ward. One of the patients interrupted my colleague who was preaching a heavy theological sermon with that question: "What did you have in mind for us to do?" It was an embarrassing question because neither one of us had given any thought to the practical outcome of the sermon or the worship service. We wanted to inspire the patients and strengthen their faith, but we didn't expect them to do anything.

Fortunately for all of us one of the books of the New Testament was written by a man who was deeply concerned about the practical application of Christian faith. The author of the Letter of James never lets us forget that true faith results in specific acts of obedience and love. He was aware of the danger of cheap grace. "Cheap grace," said Dietrich Bonhoeffer "is the deadly enemy of the church," grace without obedience, grace without good works, grace without discipleship, grace without cost.

It is especially important for us to hear this warning in connection with the biblical teaching about money and posses-



St James, by Camillo Rusconi. Marble, 1713. San Giovanni in Laterano, Rome

sions. From beginning to end, the biblical writers tell us that our attitude toward wealth is the greatest threat to our wholeness of life. Our desire for money lures us away from God. "The love of money," says the author of First Timothy, "is the root of all evils." (6:10) When confronted by all this biblical material we feel like saying to the writers, "That's all very interesting. But what do you have in mind for us to do?" In answer to that question, the author of James makes some valuable suggestions.

COMMENTARY

Few documents in Christian history have given rise to as wide a variety of interpretations as this brief letter. It has been called a book, a letter, a sermon, and a manual of instruction. James the brother of Jesus, James the Apostle, and an unknown Greek teacher have been credited with its authorship. At times it sounds like a Jewish tract, at other times like a Christian homily. Some say it was written early in the church's history to a specific group, others insist it was written at a later period as a general letter to all Christians.

The opening salutation is the only place where the author makes any reference to himself: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." Strong tradition attributes the book to James, the brother of the Lord and the head of the church in Jerusalem. From all accounts we have of him, he was an effective leader who sternly insisted on obedience to the law. This letter was apparently written by just such a man, but there are two difficulties in accepting this traditional theory. First, no book in the New Testament tells us less about Jesus, yet who should be more interested in him than his own brother? Second, the book is written in such obvious Greek form, including familiarity with classical ideas and phrases, that it is difficult to believe that James, growing up in Nazareth with Jesus, could be responsible for it in its present form. About all we can say with certainty is that the document was written by a Christian teacher familiar with Judaism and Hellenism.

The name "James" may have been placed at the beginning to lend stature to the work and to help it win acceptance among Christian readers.

The author's interest in the practical side of religion may be clearly discerned in the contents and plan of his work. He offers a series of maxims or sayings in no obvious order or arrangement. Each saying, complete in itself, is related to other sayings only by minor associations of thought or language. A general summary of the contents is impossible because of the lack of ordered arrangement. It has been suggested that James was originally a "street-corner sermon" delivered by an itinerant Christian teacher. If so, the variety is intentional, for ancient sermons seldom developed one theme, but offered a wide variety of ideas in order to win and hold the attention of listeners.

Although a general theme is lacking, the book of James is best known for the author's emphasis on the relationship of faith and works. He agrees with the other New Testament writers that the faith which makes it possible for us to love God with our whole being is the starting point of religious experience. Our faith in God's grace must be clear and unwavering, "with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord." (1:6-8)

But James insists that authentic faith must be expressed in active obedience. "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him?" (2:14) In developing his argument, James uses Abraham and Rahab as examples. Abraham demonstrated his faith through his willingness to sacrifice his son and Rahab expressed her faith by showing hospitality to strangers. "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone . . . For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead." (2:24,26)

In applying his teaching to the practical dimensions of life the primary example which the author uses is in the area of

money and possessions. He shares the concern Jesus had about the way money diverts us from God and our relationship with him. "For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits." (1:11) "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter." (5:1-5)

This teaching continues the theme which appears in so many biblical writings. But James adds a new dimension. "Do something about it," he says. The basic thrust of his book carries us out of the realm of thought and discussion into specific acts of obedience. He seems to be saying to us, "Don't sit around talking about your faith and worrying about how your wealth undermines your relationship with God. Act now to do something about it. In spite of all your talking, praying, and worshiping, your faith is dead unless it leads to works of obedience and love."

There are two levels on which we can act in practical ways to avoid the dangers of wealth and possessions. First, we can act as *individuals* to use our money in a generous way to care for the needs of others. It is important to note that the basic definition of religion in James includes acts of compassion: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction" (1:27) Later, in the course of his main argument about the relation of faith and works, the author builds his case on a similar example. "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one

of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (2:14-17) By using our wealth to care for those in need, we not only avoid the dangers to faith posed by money, we actually strengthen our faith by expressing it in a concrete way.

Second, we can act in a practical way as a *community* of faith by vigorously excluding all distinctions based on economic difference. The problem of wealth is not only an individual problem. It is also reflected in the social condition of our existence. The love of money causes the rich to cheat the poor and create structures which limit the freedom of those without material wealth. (5:4-5) Moreover, greed is one of the primary causes of warfare. "What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war." (4:1-2)

One of the positive contributions which the Christian community can make to the restructuring of society and the correction of these social problems is to create a "faith community" in which economic distinctions are overcome. "My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while you say to the poor man, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you, is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme that honorable name by which you are called. If you really fulfil the royal law, according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well. But if you

show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors." (2:1-9) To honor the rich and dishonor the poor is to ignore the whole new concept of life together which Jesus introduced through his life and ministry. On the other hand, when the church lives as a true community of love, it gives the world a model of our social existence as God intends it. By working at community in this way, the church is making a very practical contribution toward the resolution of social problems caused by money and possessions.