



Sermon for the Feast of St. James of Jerusalem
October 23, 2022

[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

St. James of Jerusalem

Matthew 13:54-58

⁵⁴ Coming to his hometown [Jesus] taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? ⁵⁵ Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶ And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” ⁵⁷ And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.” ⁵⁸ And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.

James 1:1-12

¹ James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. ² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. ⁹ Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. ¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

St. James the Just – a witness of the resurrection, the first bishop of Jerusalem, and a martyr for Christ – had the particular mixed blessing of being too closely related to Jesus. The Church has reached no consensus as to just how closely they may have been related, but Scripture has bestowed upon him the title, “Brother of the Lord.” We may be satisfied with that, recent archeological discoveries notwithstanding.¹

For all of that, St. James never describes himself as a “brother,” but as a servant (slave) of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is remembered with thanksgiving on this day, as a servant of Christ and of His Church. But even in that capacity, he has not been



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regarded with consistent appreciation. His epistle has been both denounced and applauded, some even treating it as a “corrective” against the writings of St. Paul. His supervision and governance of the Jerusalem Council has been viewed either as one of diplomacy or of compromise. And he is at least partially to blame for the pressures of a Judaizing form of Christianity which opposed the mission to the Gentiles.² Only rarely has James been described, though appropriately so, as the Apostle of Faith, but it was *by* faith, and *for* the Faith, that he served and suffered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But this was not always the case for James. If Jesus was dishonored and rejected by His hometown on account of the fact that everyone knew His family, who were right there living in their midst, then His *family* at that point – including James – could not honor Him as they should.

As is so often true – and James would later make this plain in his Epistle – the problem was not a lack of *knowledge*, but a lack of *faith and trust* in the One whose power is made perfect in weakness. It’s not hard to imagine that the brothers of Jesus – and their hometown, for that matter – would readily have cheered and rallied around the “local boy” who made good, but He was not the kind of messiah for which they had hoped. The scandal of Jesus, you see, is always that of His cross, for the cross was a symbol of death and defeat. Bear in mind that the cross was a form of capital punishment. We may as well wear little electric chairs or hypodermic needles³ around our necks, for that would be the meaning of the cross to the people of Jesus’ day. He was executed as a criminal whose actions demanded the death sentence.

His wisdom and miracles are offensive to some even today because they involve His cross; they bring hostility and persecution, they divide families, they challenge prevailing opinions, and, in many places around the world, they cost people their lives. When St. Paul speaks of not being ashamed of the gospel, he’s saying that he’s not ashamed of the cross.⁴ The people of Nazareth – including James – could never have conceived of a messiah who would save the world by dying on a cross, but, as James would eventually learn, it is by the cross that people are either driven to despair or brought to faith.

What was it, then, that brought St. James from disbelief to faith in the One who was his Brother “according to the flesh,” but who was from all eternity his Lord and God? It was the cross, but the very thing that vindicates the cross and separates it from all other crosses in the history of the world: the *resurrection*, for by Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, James’ Brother became his Savior. What had been scandalous and offensive became for James the very source of all wisdom and joy. The various trials and temptations that he witnessed in his Brother, and those that James himself endured even to the point of martyrdom, were the crucible in which his faith was formed, tested, and tried.

Where is that crucible in your life? Is it perhaps that you would be more comfortable with a Lord and Savior who doesn’t ask too much of you, who gives you the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation, but doesn’t demand that you do anything to maintain your



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end of the relationship? We love having a Savior, but we like Him to be seated far above the heavens with the power to rock our world, but instead we're faced with a brother in the flesh who speaks your forgiveness and salvation from the cross in unassuming frailty and weakness, and bids us look to Him to see the cost of our salvation.

Or is it perhaps that you would prefer that God's generosity would be more direct, that He would give to those in need without involving you, but instead, He uses your wallet as a kind of clearinghouse, where He supplies your needs in abundance and then asks you to be an agent through whom His blessings are distributed to others?

Or maybe you wish participating in the life of Christ didn't include the uglier, less pleasant aspects of His life. We tend not to like dealing with people out of our station. Some people don't like mingling with those of a lower status – those they consider lower class, less intelligent, maybe even dirtier or smellier than themselves. Others don't care for those they might call "uppity" or "snooty" – those whose income is much higher than theirs, who live in "ritzy" neighborhoods or drive fancier cars. This, to a large degree, is how the Gentiles and the Jews viewed one another, but Jesus called them both into one communion, to be one body in Him. Maybe it's hard for you to have a Savior who died a criminal's death, who came to be a suffering servant, and you don't like the fact that He urges you to rejoice in your suffering and to boast of your lowliness. After all, the cross may have been right for Jesus, but perhaps you would just as soon have your little heaven on earth and then receive your crown of glory besides.

The wisdom of Jesus befuddles us, as it befuddled His brothers according to the flesh. After His Bread of Life discourse⁵, when most of those who'd been following Him – who had even wanted to make Him their King! – turned away from Him and abandoned Him, His brothers urged Him to go up to the Feast and strut His stuff before the world.⁶ Publicity and popularity were their prescription. John tells us that even His own brothers didn't believe in Him. Oh, they knew the mighty works He could do, but they couldn't put their faith in One who seemed so determined to alienate His own disciples and set Himself against the world.

Be careful what you ask for, the sort of wisdom for which you pray. For the wisdom of God comes from and with the cross of Christ the crucified, which is why we're so tempted to waver, to doubt, and to be tossed about by the wind. It is, indeed, a terrible paradox – a Catch-22 – by the standards of the world. Your Lord and God and Savior, all joy and all wisdom, are found only in the cross. As soon as you let go of the cross and turn away from it in disbelief, you let go of all the rest and lose everything. Apart from faith, you receive nothing; just as the Lord did not do many miracles in Nazareth, because of their unbelief. The necessary faith is always faith in the Crucified One and His cross, which turns everything inside-out and upside-down. Such is the faith to which you are called by His Word, through His servant James.

The LWML – The Lutheran Women's Missionary League – whom we honor today, uses as their theme the colors of purple and gold, symbolizing royalty and integrity. But,



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have you ever contemplated the fact that purple is also the color of Lent, representing repentance on the part of those who contemplate the suffering and death of Christ for their sins? For 80 years now, the ladies of the LWML have, like James, been servants of our Lord Jesus Christ, offering themselves in humble service to the Faith for the sake of their Savior. Mites are given sometimes at great sacrifice on the part of the givers. The Lutheran Women's Missionary League has been a tireless force behind the proclamation of the Gospel in nearly every corner of the planet. Hospitals have been built, missionaries supported, the necessities for life and ministry provided through their dedicated self-sacrifice. Believe me, these things have not been accomplished without great personal cost to many of its members. They have not been ashamed of the gospel. They have not been afraid to cross racial and economic barriers. Their love for their Brother Jesus spills over and touches all. If St. James is Jesus' brother, the LWML stands in for His sisters, serving Him with humility under the shadow of the Cross.

James' own epistle reinforces this notion. How frequently he addresses his readers as his "beloved brothers." We could easily add: beloved sisters. For you who believe in Him and serve Him are all children of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. You have been born again of water and the Spirit by your Baptism into that scandalous and offensive cross, through which Christ has become not only your Brother, but, more importantly, your Savior. And because of Him and His cross and resurrection, you, too, will be resurrected from the grave to live with Him and all your brothers and sisters in the Faith for all eternity. You are sons and daughters of Jesus, not by genealogy, but by faith – faith in the Holy Communion of His Body and Blood, given and poured out for the sins of the world. Christ you serve. Christ you share. To Christ you sing your hymns of praise. For to Him belongs all praise, glory, and honor, in the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

1. The discovery of the burial box (ossuary) of James was announced on October 21, 2002 and was said to have been inscribed with the name of James, "the son of Joseph, and the brother of Jesus."
2. The leaders of the Church in Jerusalem were insisting that Gentile converts to Christianity also be held accountable to Jewish ceremonial laws, including circumcision. Paul confronted them and they relented (Gal. 2:11-14; Acts 15:1-21).
3. Used in execution by lethal injection.
4. Roman 1:16
5. John 6:22-71
6. John 7:1-9