

More than straw

The importance of James to contemporary society

by Mathew Block

In Martin Luther's time, there was an inescapable preoccupation with works. Since religious leaders of the day told people that salvation was dependent upon their own efforts, they laboured under the impossible burden of their own sin. The monolithic requirements of the Law stood always before them. At no time were they permitted to see the hope of the Gospel in its entirety. As a result, Martin Luther's rediscovery of grace in the letters of Paul was earth-shattering. Everything people had believed was turned on its head. With grace revealed, the purpose of the Law was put back into focus.

In August, as I watched Evangelical Lutheran Church of America's Churchwide Assembly vote to ordain non-celibate homosexual people, I heard again and again one word from the camp pushing for the motion's adoption—grace. God's grace welcomes all, they said. God's grace is offered to all. God's grace showers all with a love that goes beyond understanding. While this is all true, it misses an important part of the story: God's grace welcomes *sinners*.

It appears the pendulum has swung the opposite way since Luther's time. Then, preoccupation with the Law blinded people from grace. Today, people preach grace without recognition of the Law. Their concept of grace welcomes all. *Period*. We must not mention that grace is necessary because of sin – as a subject, sin is just too unpopular. Nor may we mention that the grace Scripture speaks of is transformative in nature. As they understand it, grace simply *is*, and it is for all people regardless of what they do or believe.

Such a grace is attractive to contemporary Western society. "Free salvation that allows me to keep living in whatever way I choose? Sign me up!" But this grace ignores the necessity of the crucifixion. In a religion with such cheap grace, there is no talk of sin. And without sin, there is no discussion of forgiveness. And without forgiveness, there is no need to remember the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So free is the grace Western society preaches that Christ himself seems at best an afterthought.

If St. Paul was the biblical writer the world most needed to hear in Luther's time, perhaps today it is James.

Luther may have questioned the canonicity of the epistle, but perhaps that is to be expected. In responding to the 'works righteousness' theology of his day, Luther saw James too frequently misquoted, and too easily misused to support a heresy that had taken hold of the Church. It is not surprising he called James an 'epistle of straw.'

But sometimes straw is more important than we think. Consider the plight of the Hebrews in Egypt. When Moses and Aaron approached Pharaoh to ask for the release of the Hebrews for three days to allow them to worship God in the desert, Pharaoh refused. Instead, he increased their workload, telling them to continue making as many bricks but now, he would not provide the straw they need. They had to find it themselves.

Sometimes we need straw. The Hebrews needed it literally. If James is "straw," then perhaps *we* need it figuratively. Luther could not have anticipated a time when the message of the Law would be disregarded so eagerly. Had he lived to see our times, I do not doubt he would have immediately recognized the necessity of James to the life of the Church. James reminds us that grace is *transformative*. We are assuredly saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that *is* alone. True faith is always accompanied by transformation. Justification must be followed by sanctification.

The grace of Christ is offered to us as *sinners*. On this front, Luther's words speak as strongly today as they did when first he wrote them:

"If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but the true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner and let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world."

Thank God for grace. But thank God as well for the Law that shows us why we *need* grace. For any Gospel divorced from the Law is a Gospel divorced from Christ.

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