

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“GOD MAKES SAINTS OUT OF SINNERS”  
September 27, 2009  
James 5:1-6  
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

God’s jurisdiction extends beyond our own networks of relationships and concerns. God’s love is not limited to our own religious and political backyards.

God has all the power there is and all the power he needs. And all that power is available to you and me. This God, of whom I speak, having heard the cries of the oppressed, can be trusted to right wrong, correct injustice, and bring judgment on those who defraud the poor.

Health and wealth are often seen as signs of divine favor. But those who thrive and prosper at the expense of other nations, or classes, or races are fattening themselves for a day of slaughter.

We learned as children about the mixed blessing of medicine. The good news is that medicine can make us well. The bad news is that it tastes bad or, worse, involves being stuck with a needle. Bad tasting medicine is so hard to swallow that it sometimes ends up on the child instead of in the child - - or on the parent! Adults can be as squeamish about needles as children, and the only good thing about getting a “**shot**” is that it doesn’t last long. More seriously, some catastrophic diseases are only responsive to treatments that may threaten the patient as much or more than the actual disease. Healing, for all its benefits, is seldom pain-free.

Truth, like medicine, has healing properties. But truth is sometimes a mixed blessing, just as medicine is. And truth sometimes destroys. There is a popular line from a recent motion picture, delivered by Jack Nicholson. In a military court his character shouts at Tom Cruise’s character, “**You can’t**

**handle the truth!”** Sometimes we can’t. But neither can we alter the truth. The truth may be accepted or denied, but it remains the truth.

The New Testament book of James was probably a sermon in its original form. It can be read aloud in fifteen to twenty minutes. Most people in our congregation feel that is a sufficient length for a sermon. But of course, there are others who may believe that it is a bit on the lengthy side! James preaches with the boldness of the Hebrew prophets, unwavering in his condemnation of evil. He pulls no punches when he is on the attack, leaving little doubt about his target. He is primarily concerned with social and economic injustice, both in the world at large and within the Christian community.

Usually James refers to his hearers as **“brethren,”** or **“beloved brethren.”** But a little past the midpoint he suddenly and shockingly refers to them as **“unfaithful creatures.”** (4:4) He rails against those who **“desire and do not have,”** who **“covet and cannot obtain,”** and who therefore fight, wage war, and kill. They are **“unfaithful creatures”** who apparently do not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God! Does James think they can handle such hard truth? We don’t know. But James knows that only by facing the truth can they find the healing they need.

James offers a perfect definition of sin. **“Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”** (4:17) Unfortunately, some make a shallow application of this definition, interpreting sin as doing certain, expressly forbidden things and moral goodness as not doing these same things. Jesus charged the Pharisees with failing to give attention to **“the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith.”** (Mt 23:23) James takes on the weightier things Jesus was talking about, especially the problems of economic injustice. Wealth gained through the suffering of others is a serious moral problem. Today’s passage from James is as pointed and bold as anything from the prophets of old. He has already addressed the dangers of wealth in the first two chapters, but now he returns to it with vigor.

James pictures the future judgment of God as if it has already occurred: **“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries coming upon you,”** he says. They have stored up wealth for the last days, but their riches have rotted and their garments are moth-eaten. Their silver and gold have rusted. The wealth James describes was gained by defrauding laborers. The cries of

the abused, he says, have reached the ears of God. In biblical times this practice was perpetrated by rich landowners on poor day-laborers. In today's complex, industrialized world, the same fraud is perpetrated not just against manual laborers but against consumers, underdeveloped nations, and disorganized masses of people who have no human advocate. The fraud is perpetrated through fixed systems designed to protect the interests of the rich at the expense of the poor. The message of James is that God is patient but not asleep.

Truth that is exclusively negative has no healing power. The prophets of Israel understood that the truth of God involves both bad news and good news. Hosea, for example, proclaimed God's judgment: ***"The Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery . . . therefore the land mourns."*** (4:1-3) The covenant of God, however, offered a gracious possibility. If the people repent of their sin and return to God, there is hope. The prophet says, ***"Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God."*** God says, ***"I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them."*** (14:1,4)

Truth that heals involves, first, coming to terms with the reality of our sinfulness and our failures to do the will of God. Second, it involves trusting in the forgiving mercy of God. This two-fold truth cannot be manipulated or abused. Empress Catherine the Great supposedly said, **"I shall be an autocrat: that's my trade. And the good Lord will forgive me: that's his."** But such presumption utterly fails to understand the nature of God's love. Sin is a grim, dark, destructive reality. Even God's grace cannot undo all of the damage we do in living apart from God's will. We cannot simply return to some previous chapter of life and change it. But, beginning where we are, we can live and work toward different ends.

The difference can be like becoming a new person. But it means becoming who we really are. Kierkegaard said it is wonderful that God creates **"out of nothing,"** but what is more wonderful is that God **"makes saints out of sinners."**

God is not dead. God has not abdicated the throne of sovereignty. Though the ungodly live in luxury by grinding the life out of the poor, though corrupt systems prey on those who are most vulnerable, the judgment

of God is assured. In his poem “**Retribution,**” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote: **“though the mills of God grind slowly, / yet they grind exceeding small; / Though with patience God stands waiting, / with exactness grinds he all.”**

It is good news that God is at work outside our frames of reference. We are not alone in doing God’s will in the world. Anyone who fights injustice, relieves suffering or spreads peace is doing the will of God. Those who are not against us are for us, said Jesus.

If you think you can handle that truth, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.