

James 5:13-20

The Great Miracle

Mark 9:38-50

September 29, 2024

It is good to take the opportunity when given it, to talk about context, for it can be a necessary part of interpretation. It is fair to say that most people know the difference between a ballet, for instance, and a situation comedy; between a baseball game and a track meet; and wouldn't have a difficult time distinguishing between a farm and a steel mill.

Context matters, and people learn the characteristics of each context in which they live; home, school, work, play, church.

The distinctions are helpful because they help us interpret what is happening, and how to read the signals being sent, how to send signals that can be meaningfully received and interpreted; when to joke around and when to be serious, when to speak and when to be silent, when to be laugh and when to cry, when to relax and when to come to attention.

When we interpret the bible, we find that context matters in a similar way. Poetry is treated differently than narrative prose; history is treated differently than parables; letters are different from court records and genealogies.

In both of today's readings we find an interesting opportunity for interpretation. The context helps. It is the leading theory of the day, to believe that the first gospel to be written was the Gospel of Mark; and the

authors of Matthew and Luke both had a copy of Mark when they wrote their gospels.

Furthermore, it is widely believed that in the early decades of the Christian faith there came to be a collection of, "sayings," or, "things that Jesus said," written down, and that Matthew and Luke also had a copy of that list of sayings, when they sat down to write their versions of the story of Jesus and the beginnings of Christianity. Much of what is contained in this source is found in The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke, and other places.

Some of the more challenging texts in all the bible are in the Sermon on the Mount; the Lord's Prayer, The Golden Rule, teaching about fasting and alms; turning the other cheek, having no anxiety and seeking the Kingdom of Heaven; loving one's enemy.

In one case, Jesus is teaching about adultery, and desire and says, "if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

One doesn't expect to read anything quite like that in the gospel of Mark and yet a statement just like it is very much what we do read,

“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.” And then, surprisingly for Mark, “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell.”

It sounds like The Sermon. Perhaps we should interpret it that way. One might expect to see a large collection of one-eyed, one-handed, and single-footed believers in church on Sunday morning. But, alas, it is not so. It has been nearly 2,000 years since Jesus said these words, and they found their way in the gospels and there never has been such a collection of believers. I have never seen even one such person, or if I did, there was another explanation, having nothing to do with sin or any expression of extreme devotion. These texts have not been taken literally. Yet they must be taken seriously.

Given that each of us has sinned and would readily admit so, and are two-handed, two-footed, and two-eyed human beings, how should we understand the extreme nature of these teachings?

One might also consider the text from James about prayer being powerful and effective. It has been taken by some to refer only to bodily healing, and to the belief every prayer for healing will be met with a healing miracle. Many times they are. But they are all temporary. And there are apparent exceptions.

The exceptions can be problematic; how does one handle things when a prayed for healing *doesn't* happen, small miracles that do not last? One can see that sometimes our prayers are not answered as we hope and expect. In a similar way to the gospel reading, we take this text not literally, but very seriously, because it teaches us about the power of prayer.

There is another contextual consideration. We understand the distinction between the things of God and human things. We remember the response of Jesus to Peter at Caesaria Philippi, “You do not have in mind the things of God, but human things.” It is not possible for us to be unconcerned with this-life. And so we are. Yet we are clearly meant to understand that no eternal fulfillment is possible in a this-world context, except that which comes from the other, the context of God.

There will always be some measure of discomfort in earthly life. No one ever said the life of faith would be easy, nor that earthly life would be painless, or that ease should be a part of our expectations. Human life comes to us with a set of realities, distractions and temptations, and some hardships associated with

mortality that threaten to pull us apart inwardly as well as outwardly.

From both texts we learn of the importance of the spiritual life for overall wellness, superior to the physical life, which is passing away. We learn that a relationship with God is the most important relationship that we can have, that as attached as we sometimes are to what Paul called, “this earthly tent”, and to this world, it is not the source of life or its fulfillment.

Thus, when it seeks to control, have dominion over us, we are taught to seek a higher way, the way of eternity, of heaven, even if we bear hardships or make sacrifices.

We, all of us, are led towards a Christ-centered life rather than a self-centered life. We are led away from the pursuits of and obsessions with material life, or of the *excessive attachment* to the pursuits of the material life - food, clothing, success, power, wealth, the world’s obsession with the body. We participate in this life without being controlled by its considerations.

And we are led towards a life from God characterized by faith, leading to inner peace, genuine hope no matter what is happening in history or in our personal experience, a surprising joy, and an unselfish love that can only be described as divine.

Jesus describes our lives in terms of salt, and says that our presence in the world is meant to be a kind of

saltiness; that is, we stand out as distinct from those around us, giving an example of a life not dominated by earthly concerns, and a kind of flavor to life that challenges, or is meant to challenge others, to a better way.

How does the saltiness make itself known? It is not in the bodies, which bear the marks of mortality as does everyone else’s. It shows up in our goodness, which is born of God, and not itself our own doing. It shows up in our faith that believes in God’s message of grace for the whole world; it shows up in our love, which sees everyone as the object of God’s love, mercy, and forgiveness. And it shows up in the willingness to be at peace with each other, and with all God’s fellowship. It shows up in our hope.

Perhaps we have an unrealistic and over materialistic view of wellness. What is taught about the body is that it can be restored and strong in heaven while injured and weak on earth. What is promised by James is salvation.

James promises wellness and uses the words that means, salvation, and characterizes wellness with two statements: “The Lord will raise him up (resurrection) and their sins will be forgiven,” which tells us what it means to be well. Resurrection and reconciliation through forgiveness, that is what it means to be well. And that is the *Great Miracle*.

Romans 2:17-3:20

Getting down to business - everyone is guilty

Should we not sin?

What value is in being Jewish?

What value is in being Christian?

We bear the example and message to the world

We are in the same condition

17 Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; 18 if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; 19 if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— 21 you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24 As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

25 Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. 26 So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? 27 The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you

who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

28 A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.

29 No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God.

3 What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? 2 Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

3 What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness? 4 Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written:

“So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.”

5 But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) 6 Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? 7 Someone might argue, “If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?” 8 Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—“Let us do evil that good may result”? Their condemnation is just!

No One Is Righteous

9 What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the

charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. 10 As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;

11 there is no one who understands;

there is no one who seeks God.

12 All have turned away,

they have together become worthless;

there is no one who does good,

not even one.”

13 “Their throats are open graves;

their tongues practice deceit.”

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”

14 “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

16 ruin and misery mark their ways,

17 and the way of peace they do not know.”

18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)