

THREE WORDS FOR THOSE WHO WOULD KNOW GOD'S LOVE
James 4:7-10

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March 14, 2010 Lent 4, c

⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Dear beloved of God,

Are you a good person? I hear those words often. They are usually accompanied by some failure, some wrong that has been committed with the idea that this event, whatever it is, is an anomaly to their true nature. If you asked most people you know that simple question, "Are you a good person," I believe most of them would say, "Yes. I am a good person."

No one wants to be thought of as not being a good person. The result of that is that in an attempt to show they are good, sometimes people will even compare themselves to someone who they do not believe is as good. "I never murdered anyone. I never beat my children. I go to church." They are all words people use at times to compare themselves to others in an attempt to show they are good.

For you and me, this is especially enticing, because we know God's love and we want to be worthy of such love. When we know of others who are less worthy, it would be easy to point out why. All three of our readings for this morning speak of this love and how God applies it. I've tried to simplify it to make it easy to remember. So, listen closely to THREE WORDS FOR THOSE WHO WOULD KNOW GOD'S LOVE.

1

When we hear God's Words recorded by James there are a number of words that jump off the page at us. They are words like sinners, double-minded, dirty hands, unclean hearts, laughter when you should mourn, joy when there should be gloom. In each of these instances they are exactly the opposite of what God would want.

It's like this: Did you ever go the ice cream store where Grandpa was going to buy you a cone? You go to pick out exactly the flavor that suited you best. But then you got there and there were so many. Chocolate chip, strawberry, or the flavor of the day. Remember how Grandpa and the girl who was behind the counter, waited and waited for you to make up your mind? That is double minded.

Do you remember the time when you were a teen-ager and you and your friend were walking down the snowy winter street. Remember how your friend slipped on the ice in the middle of your conversation about the latest popular music. He slipped, went up in the air and then fell. You laughed and laughed because it was so funny, until you found he had broken his arm. That's laughter when you should mourn.

These are just some of the pictures that describe us and the contrary nature of sin. They show that we are exactly the opposite of what God wants us to be. When it isn't just our hands but our hearts that are unclean; when we say we want to be Christians but find ourselves very comfortable with the ideas, opinions and actions of this world; when we should be mourning over the lack of righteousness of our society but we tune in with eager anticipation of the latest gossip – that is what sin is all about. For those who would know God's love, the first word is **ADMIT**. Admit the contrary nature of sin in our lives. *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.* (Romans 7:18)

2

That is a difficult thing to do. But once having admitted all of this, James uses a number of action verbs to talk about what we should do with all of this sin in our lives. He uses words like wash, purify, grieve, mourn, wail, change.

Do you remember when you were a child and you were called in to dinner. Did your parents ever say to you, "It's time to wash up for dinner?" It didn't matter if you were watching TV, playing with dog, or out digging in the sandbox. Did you ever wash your hands like this? (look at both hands and wipe them on your clothes). Obviously you didn't think it was a big deal and Mom didn't know what she was

talking about. All of her lectures about germs, bacteria, and worms didn't really matter. Your hands didn't need to be washed. But then before you got to the table, Dad asked you again. The first place you looked was your hands to see if somehow he could tell by looking at them. Then you looked at the floor, because you knew you hadn't done it. All that love that went into preparing a meal for you and you couldn't even wash your hands! Remember your shame as you marched back and washed and washed until your hands were gleaming!

That is our encouragement from our James. When we see how we have been exactly the opposite of the way the Lord would have us be, we have some work to do. When you see the love of a God who blesses you every single day of your life, who preserves your life in good times and bad, who will grant you the desires of your heart if you only ask for them! But you and I spend our lives ignoring him as if he doesn't know what we are doing or what he is doing. We look for the line between good and bad, not so we can avoid it completely, but so that we can go right up to the edge and peer over, and then say it isn't that bad when we step over. Wash your hands, or perhaps we can say it another way, repent and turn away from your sin, which brings us to our second word for those who would know God's love: **SUBMIT**. Humbly submit your life and will to God.

3

If we stop there the shame we feel over our sin and rebellion against God will consume us. It can become such a burden, that people have been utterly lost in this shame and guilt. For those who go no further than to see how horrible their lives are, even to the point of admitting it publicly, shame continues to follow them and, in the end, leads to more sin, more grief, more rebellion.

James would have none of that however. He sees something much greater to fill that void where sin had been. He says, *Come near to God and he will come near to you. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*

He is talking about that moment we read about in our gospel lesson for today. It's that moment when the Son who has demanded his inheritance and wasted it, recognizes that he has made a horrible mistake. Although he does not deserve to be called his Father's son anymore, he would be willing simply to be his Father's servant. But this young man who has admitted his sin and humbly submitted himself to his father, finds his reception is not as a potential employee. His father lifts him up, welcomes him back, and restores him to his treasured position in the family. His father's love is so great, that he is willing to overcome all for the sake of his beloved child.

Brothers and sisters, this is the love your Father in heaven has for you. No matter where you have been, no matter what you have done, He opens his arms to you and welcomes you back into his embrace. He knows precisely and in great detail, just how bad you have been and loves you even so! Need proof? Look at your brother's agony! Look at the love in his eyes, in his words, and in his actions as he shows you how welcome you are. Look at the way he opens his arms for you too, and then gives up his life. In place of your guilt and shame he offers you his love and a place in his family. That brings us to the final word for those who would know God's love: **COMMIT**. But it is not a commitment that you and I make to each other or to God. It is a commitment he has made to you and me to love us completely.

Are you a good person? I guess it all depends on how you define the word good. Perhaps there is a better question to ask, a better statement to make. Are you loved? It is wonderful to be loved by your spouse, your parents, your children, and your friends. But, your Lord tells you his love for you is even greater! Amen.

Hymn 304:6-7

Oh, how blest it is to know, were as scarlet my transgression,
It shall be as white as snow By your blood and bitter passion,
For these words I do believe, Jesus sinners does receive.

Jesus sinners does receive. Even I have been forgiven.
And when I this earth must leave, I shall find an open heaven.
Dying, still to him I cleave – Jesus sinners does receive.