



(Disciples Church, Bakersfield CA)

Character counts. For the last 26 years, the President and Congress have declared the third week in October as “Character Counts” week. The 2019 Proclamation reads in part:

Since our Nation’s founding, we have recognized that the good character of our people is vital to maintaining our freedom. The strength of our Union and the defense of our precious liberty require both constant vigilance and moral clarity. During National Character Counts Week, we reaffirm our commitment to developing and demonstrating admirable qualities to enrich our lives and the lives of others. In doing so, we are confident that we can positively influence the next generation of our Nation’s leaders and inspire them to lead lives of virtue and integrity.¹

And further:

Throughout this week, and each day of our lives, may we strive to demonstrate good character through our thoughts, discourse, and deeds in our homes, schools, workplaces, and houses of worship. Let us set an example for others of the timeless values of respect, compassion, justice, tolerance, fairness, and integrity. May we never forget that our Nation is only as strong as the virtue and character of our citizenry.²

The Letter of James could be an early proclamation that character counts. That we, as Christians must talk-the-talk and walk-the-walk. A reminder that the world looks, every day, to see if we measure up to what we say we believe. Or whether the appropriate response to our lives is correctly reflected in a saying attributed to Mahatma Ghandi: “I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”

In our snippet from the Letter of James this morning we are not only encouraged to be patient, but also reminded not to grumble against one another so that we may not be judged. It’s hard not to grumble when life isn’t going as we wish it were or when someone has acted against us in ways that are unfair. It’s hard not to grumble when we’ve done our very best and someone else

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-proclamation-national-character-counts-week-2019/> (12/10/19)

² Id.

Isaiah 35: 1-10; Psalm 146: 4-9; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11

judged it not good enough. It hurts. It can be tempting to give up or to give less than our best the next time because our best just doesn't seem to matter.

Each of us has or will have times in our lives when things do not go our way regardless of our efforts. The challenge might be relatively small or it might be huge. It might be not finding or keeping a job making life financially uncertain. It might be the death of someone we love and feeling like we can't go on. It might be an illness or other physical malady that will require surgery and a lengthy recovery. It might be a betrayal by someone we really trusted. When we come to those testing times, Scripture can be helpful as a guideline to how we are to react.

1 Corinthians 10: 13, NRSV translation reads:

No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

The Message paraphrase of this passage is:

No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it.

And the refrigerator magnet that I found reworks the text this way: I know God won't give me more than I can bear but sometimes I wish he didn't trust me so much.

Burdens can seem overwhelming at times. James encourages his readers to be patient in suffering. He also reminds them that they are not alone and harkens back to the patience of Job. I, for one, hope never to experience what Job went through and never to need that level of patience!

James offers us brief sentences- much like what we find in the Book of Proverbs: short, pithy sayings and advice for life.

Are any of you suffering? They should pray.

Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

Each of these requires actions. James firmly believed that faith without works is dead. When you cut through all the words, all the arguments, at the end of the day, James says that a faith that does not manifest itself in works is not truly faith.

In the Gospel of Matthew that we read this morning, Jesus tells John's disciples exactly this. John is in prison but sends his disciples to Jesus. Their question: "are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" Jesus responds: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them." Faith lives in action. Faith is truly faith when we care for those less fortunate than ourselves.

Isaiah 35: 1-10; Psalm 146: 4-9; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11

James and the apostle Paul were contemporaries, both writing in the period between Jesus's death and their own deaths; Paul died about the year 65 and James died about the year 62. The conflict between Paul, who held that "faith alone" or "sola fide" and James, "faith without works is dead" has continued down the centuries to Martin Luther and to us. One way of reading Paul's position is that we only have to believe. We only have to have faith that Jesus came to earth to bear our sins and offer us salvation. If we accept that, then we are saved and we need not take any further action. We cannot earn our salvation by what we do. We are granted, through God's grace, salvation – it is a free gift.

From my perspective, that's fine as far as it goes. But Paul doesn't go far enough and I'm strongly in the James camp. If I call myself a follower of Jesus Christ, then I am compelled to follow what Jesus did, to the best of my ability. Yes, it is God's grace that offers salvation. Yes, I cannot earn my way into God's good graces by my actions. At the same time, my actions show that I am a follower of Christ. That, as we are commanded as far back as Deuteronomy and in James, chapter 1, verse 27: Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress. Faith must be active with works. Faith is deeper and richer when we follow the example of Jesus. Believe, yes. Speak and teach, yes. But also live a life that witnesses to the love of God in how we live and move and have our being, rooted in the one that gives us life. Rooted in the one who saves us by unmerited grace. Come and see. Come and believe. Go and act. Amen.