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By [Thomas G. Long](#)

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[“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves”](#) is the kind of statement that drove Luther up a wall. Luther famously thought James to be “an epistle of straw,” and he stored up a few [words](#) of faint praise with which to damn the letter:

James does nothing more than drive to the law and its works. Besides, he throws things together so chaotically that it seems to me he must have been some good, pious man, who took a few sayings from the disciples of the apostles and thus tossed them off on paper.

In my early days as a preacher, I tacitly agreed with Luther. I perhaps would never have spoken out loud his frank criticisms of James, but I was so attached to narrative as a genre and sheer grace as a theological theme that James’s little moral lessons—on everything from holding one’s tongue to showing patience in suffering to the ethics of ushering in worship—seemed to me to be, if not straw, at least small potatoes. I wanted people to be *hearers* of the word; *doing* was for Sunday school.

How seasons change. Some of the biblical documents that Luther (and I) found so wanting—James, Revelation, Hebrews—contain the very stuff that many congregations now lean forward eagerly to hear. Why?

In [one of his early books](#), Don Browning makes the case that pastors of a certain generation were trained to suspend moral judgment as pastoral caregivers. When people came to their pastors for counsel, this constituted an implicit statement, “I know what I am supposed to do in life, but I have gotten to the place that I cannot do it.” In the safety and privacy of the counseling relationship, the pastor was to communicate, in effect, “In here there is no right or wrong, only total acceptance and unconditional grace.” The hope was that in this nonjudgmental environment the broken places could be healed and the parishioners could get back into the moral

fray.

But now the culture has changed, observes Browning. When people come to their pastors today, their cry is often not “I know what I am supposed to do; I just can’t do it,” but “I do not know what I am supposed to do.” In a [Jon and Kate Plus 8](#) era, people can be quite unsure about what constitutes the shape of a life that matters, about what it means to live a life that has moral substance. To suspend the categories of right and wrong would do nothing but exacerbate the situation.

This does not mean, of course, that the church and its pastors should become hectoring and judgmental moral exhorters, but instead that pastors should call more freely upon those swaths of scripture that appeal to the wisdom and ethical traditions of the faith and should seek to help people discern what the total acceptance and grace of the gospel look like on the moral ground.

And therein lies the power in the Epistle of James. In Luther’s day, the need was to lift up the broad and sweeping themes of *sola fidei* and radical grace—it is no wonder that James’s moral small ball made Luther a tad cranky. But now, James’s very ability to hold a magnifying glass to the ethics of everyday life—his capacity to urge us toward such deeds as providing a blessing in the exchanges of daily conversation, making peace in close and sometimes strained personal relationships, caring “for widows and orphans in their distress” as a life well worth living, seeking in family and vocation to live in such gentle ways that we reap a “harvest of righteousness”—comes as a deep and cooling refreshment.

*Additional lectionary columns by Thomas Long appear in the August 25 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe. Long will also be giving the Century's [annual lecture](#) next month.*