

Neglecting James

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I don't know about you, but I find it challenging to preach on non-narrative texts. It's easy to make a good story from the Gospels or the Old Testament come alive in a sermon. It's a lot harder to do that with a theological treatise, so I tend to neglect preaching on the epistles.

The book of James is particularly challenging: not only is it not a narrative, but it's mostly one moral exhortation after another. "Do this." "Don't do that." It can be a little hard to find the gospel in all of that. Which is why some people have never cared much for James.

The early church wasn't quite sure what to do with the book. It almost didn't make it into the New Testament. And if Luther had gotten his way, it would have been relegated to an appendix. It's always been out there on the edge of the canon, mostly because its message seems not to jibe so well with Paul's. Paul says a person is justified by faith, not works. James says a person is justified by works, not faith. What are we supposed to do with that?

In the end, Paul's views on faith and works pretty much carried the day. But the church kept James in there anyway, maybe as a sort of New Testament minority report. The church was wise enough to say, "James may be a little different, but he does have a point. And he was Jesus' brother, after all. So we need his voice in there, too."

This September, I'm planning to preach a series of five weeks on the lectionary readings from James. I'm not going to attempt to iron out all the differences with Paul. Maybe some biblical scholars out there can do that, but not me. I'm going to

try to let James be James. I'm going to let him challenge us where we need to be challenged—namely, to take our works as seriously as we take our faith. And I'm going to let him lead us where we need to be led: to the doorstep of the widows and orphans among us. Because according to James, that's where the gospel becomes real.