

Submit yourselves therefore to God.

Daniel 12:1–3

Psalm 16

James 4:1-17

Mark 13:1–8

Text: James 4:7-8

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Introduction

700 years ago, from September 14 just passed, Dante Alighieri died. 2021 has been declared by Italy ‘a year of Dante;’ he has been often referred to as the ‘father’ of the Italian language, so influential is his work. Uniquely, perhaps, in literature, Dante is known really for only one work, the *Divina Commedia* (Divine Comedy). The epic poem chronicles—in 100 “cantos,” or chapters split in three parts—Dante’s journey through hell, purgatory and heaven.

On the 700th anniversary of Dante’s death Father Raymond De Souza published an op-ed titled [*Dante's good news for mankind*](#) noting, in the article, the number of literature courses still taught today on the Divine Comedy. De Souza writes in conclusion:

““Abandon hope, all ye who enter here,” is the most famous line in the Divine Comedy. Written over the entrance to hell, it describes what life would be if this sin-filled world was all that there is—at best the antechamber of despair.”

Dante believed that we matter and how we live matters. He is relentlessly realistic. Dante paints harrowing images of hell and treats the reality of sin with exquisite vividness. We modern people, who treat talk of heaven and hell as antiquated beliefs of the unsophisticated, laugh at these sections as if this is what makes Dante’s work a comedy.

“But,” De Souza continues, “Dante wrote a comedy, which, in dramatic terms, means a story with a happy ending. The second most famous line is the last one, where Dante finally encounters the “Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

That love—divine love—is at the heart of reality, not the emptiness of random chance, is the good news—or “gospel”—that Dante proclaimed seven centuries ago. That news is still needed today.”

The Apostle James too believes that we matter and that how we live matters. “Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God,” writes James. By the “world” James means, not the created order or the earth, but the whole system of humanity (it’s institutions, structures, values, and mores) as organized without God. Yes, Jesus gave his life for this world and calls his people to love this world as he does—but Jesus did not make friends with this world. Recall that Jesus said that no one can serve two masters; you cannot serve God and wealth. You have to choose. “Submit yourselves therefore to God,” writes James.

James assumes the biblical assertion that judgement is coming; the curtain will be brought down on history and judgement will be rendered—all will be set to rights. “There is only one lawgiver and judge,” continues James, “who is able to save and destroy. We saw this same picture painted in Daniel’s prophetic word about the final resurrection; “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” In our gospel reading we read of Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple; Jesus’ answer to his disciples about when this would occur is the content of this thirteenth chapter of Mark that includes Jesus’ insistence on the necessity of watchfulness for the end of history since we do not know the day or the hour of the coming of the Son of Man.

I know that judgement is not a popular message for our world mired in a mindset of self-fulfillment. Yet Jesus proclaimed it along with his Apostles and so must we announce it today as well.

1. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Adulterers!, charges James. Do you think that the Apostle James is being a little strident or ‘over-the-top’ when he makes the charge that these Christians are adulterers?’ What is he talking about? Why does he call them adulterers?

This section in James’ letter begins with the subject of conflicts and disputes which arise, says James, from cravings that are at war within you. “You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.” We hear James saying they murder and wonder what in the world is going on in these churches he addresses. I note with you that the failure to care for the poor or the oppression of the poor was often called murder in Jewish tradition. This metaphorical sense of murder fits well with the tone of the passage: they desire, yet never obtained. They oppress the poor, either by legal oppression or by withholding needed aid, and envy those who are more successful, yet their desires slip between their fingers.

We live in a culture that treasures human desire. Think of the advertising that claims you deserve to satiate your desire. Having installed low ceilings over life, humans have crowned themselves the measure of all things pertaining to themselves. Expressive individualism shapes how we approach life; looking within we believe that our desires and feelings are the true expression of who we are. And we find that our desires crash into the desires of others. And they are never quite satisfied.

James sees the culture of cravings alive among believers and over that he writes the epitaph, ‘Adulterers!’ Why? James is steeped in the older testament tradition that Israel is God’s spiritual bride. In the prophets Israel is denounced for its idolatry as spiritual adultery—giving the place of God in their lives to other gods or to no gods at all. (Hosea 1-3) Jesus called the Jewish people of his day “an adulterous generation.” (Mark 8:38) In each case the concept is applied only to Jews, never gentiles, for only those who have had a claim to have a covenant relationship with Yahweh can be included in such a condemnation. In the New Testament the basis for its application to the church comes in the bride-of-Christ imagery.

Do you know the story of the prophet Hosea? It is a heartbreaking story. God asks Hosea to marry a prostitute so that the prophet will know something of what God experiences. He is to preach about Israel's spiritual infidelity and his marriage is to be a parable of this message of God's broken heart because of Israel's infidelity. Hosea's three children are named with names that announce God's judgement of his people. Eventually Hosea's wife leaves and goes back to her prostitution. God instructs Hosea to go and buy her back as a sign that though Israel would experience exile they will one day seek the Lord again. They are still God's covenant people even though they have treated God with disdain.

I don't have to describe to you the damage adultery causes for a marriage; many of us know or can imagine the hurt of the violation of such an intimate trust. Marriage is the most common metaphor for faith because it is the human experience that most closely depicts the spiritual intimacy of the believer's relationship with God. You know that hymn that speaks of the propensity for our hearts to wander away from the God who loves us. When we put things—even good things like work or pleasure, yes even family—in the place that is rightfully God's it is spiritual adultery, says James. "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us." Submit yourselves therefore to God.

We are prone to look everywhere to satisfy our heart's desire except to the one person—our Saviour Jesus Christ—who can actually satisfy. All these cravings we have be it for food or intimacy or recognition or pleasure or power or achievement never really satisfy the human heart fully. But we keep on craving because we think just a little more will do it. As C.S. Lewis observed, "If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world."

I love how the Psalter in the Anglican Prayer Book translates Psalm 107:8-9. "O that men would therefore praise the Lord for his goodness: and declare the wonders that he doeth for the children of men! For he satisfieth the empty soul: and filleth the hungry soul with goodness." In the sixty-third Psalm the Psalmist says to God, "Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you." I wonder if I really believe that his love is better than life. I want to be able to confess that but as I look in my own heart I am prone to that 'double-mindedness' James speaks about.

2. Yet our Lord remains faithful to us in all of this; James' admonitions are predicated on our Lord's faithfulness. The theme of the faithfulness of God in his pursuit to have a people for himself is repeated again and again and again in scripture. The faithfulness of God's love for a broken world is most clearly seen at the cross of Jesus Christ. Notice what James says—Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. In Hosea, God's faithfulness is expressed this way: "I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord."

Go with me in your imaginations to that day on the shore of the Sea of Galilee when the risen Jesus meets with his disciple Peter in order to restore him. This is where Jesus asks Peter three times, do you love me? You can imagine the intimacy of that conversation. Both Peter and Jesus know that Peter denied even knowing Jesus in the hour of testing. Here Jesus faithfully restores Peter to this love relationship. (John 21:15-17)

I have noted with you before that our English translation doesn't do justice to the Greek text in this story. It is not done on purpose; it is ever the challenge when translating from one language to another. In English our one word 'love' is used to translate the array of Greek words that speak of the variety of loves in our life.

When Jesus asks Peter, the first time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these," Jesus uses that strong word that the New Testament uses to speak of the self-forgetful self-giving of God, agape. Peter is looking around at the rest of the disciples and he remembers that night a little while ago when he told Jesus—even if these guys all desert you I never will. He remembers how that turned out and so knows not to promise too much. So he says, "Yes Lord, you know I love you." Peter uses a weaker word for love—philos—meaning, good friend, buddy. Lord you know I am your good friend. You know I can at least say that.

The second time it is the same; Jesus uses agape, Peter responds with philos. But the third time Jesus uses the word philos. Simon, Son of John, are you sure that you can say you are my good friend. This is what stung Peter. And Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' And he used the word philos. The marvel is that each time Jesus gives him a commission—Feed my sheep. Jesus does not throw him overboard because he can't say agape.

This gives me great hope. I hear my Lord's question to me. 'Jim, do you love me.' It is the same question he asks of each of us. I so want to be able to say, I love you, and use the word agape. But I know better. I see the propensity in my heart to live life as if it were really all about me. I do want to be able to at least join Peter and say, "Jesus, you know I am your good friend." That Jesus is faithful in his love for me and continues to give me a commission to serve him is a wonder of his love that is beyond comprehension. I need to be reminded daily of James' admonition, in light of this great love, 'Submit yourself therefore to God.'

Conclusion

I do love the benedictions of the Bible. Take this one from Jude, for example. Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen. (Jude 24-25) Such biblical benedictions have a wonderful way of concisely articulating the end or goal God has in mind for his people. In the swirl of human events in which our lives are caught up I am comforted to remember our Lord's purposes for us are unfolding. N.T. Wright wrote, "we find ourselves caught up by the story of Jesus, by the events of his life, his death and his resurrection, and we find that he is himself the goal, the fullness of humanity as well as the fullness of divinity, and that he himself is the way, the journey by which we may ourselves come to that goal."

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