

The Righteousness of God

Text: James 1:16-21

Hymn: "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice" (LSB 556)

[L]et every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.
James 1:19-20

James's letter starts out with what sounds like common-sense, "Miss Manners" kind of stuff. But very quickly social tips turn into something more serious. Because what St James, the brother of our Lord, has to teach us is nothing less than the righteousness of God. This short passage, like much of the rest of the letter, makes for very uncomfortable reading. It makes us uncomfortable, because it calls us out. It accuses us. It puts its finger on our faults. And it goes after those parts of our life that are obviously, undeniably in conflict with God's revealed will.

James needed to say these things to the Christians to whom he was writing and he needs to say them to you as well—and me! Without actually using the word, he is calling us to repentance over the use of our ears and our tongues and over our temper.

The trouble for us is that we live in a society built entirely on the notion of rights. We have the right to life, the right to free speech, the right to equal treatment under the law, the right to trial by a jury of your peers, a right to education. And if someone acts against our rights, we have recourse—to the courts, if necessary—to make sure that our rights are respected and upheld.

Now in a civil society, rights and freedoms are a good thing for the most part. I'm not advocating their abolition. Spend five minutes in a country without these rights and you realize how important they are. Or contemplate the reality, for example, that in the

United States for every five live births, one child is deprived of her God-given right to life and is aborted in the name of the lesser freedoms of people already born.

But “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” And the relative peace and comfort and freedom in which we live is a very fine and unmerited gift from our heavenly Father, for which we ought to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

Yet living in such a society does present a danger. We are always prone to conforming to the world rather than being “transformed in the renewal of our minds” by the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:2)—not only in the way that we conduct ourselves in the world but also in the way that we understand our relationships with one another and even God. We see ourselves primarily as who we are on the earth alongside other people and this means, among other things, the importance we place on safeguarding our rights and freedoms over against the threats posed to them by others.

You have been made citizens of the kingdom of God. And this is not the way of the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God we do not live by rights and the defense of our rights over against others. In the kingdom of God we all live entirely by God’s indulgence and gift. We do not live according to mutual rights and responsibilities, freedoms and obligations. We live according to the gift of God in Christ Jesus. In the world we are slaves to the fleeting circumstances of life and prey to our own passions and desires. In the kingdom of God we are slaves to righteousness, living in the freedom of God’s children—freedom from sin and its punishment—and free to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God and as a loving servant to the neighbor. There lies true freedom.

Life in this world, as we all know, is ultimately and necessarily, a dog-eat-dog world. It's easy enough to be friendly with people we like, who don't rock our boat, and to bear with circumstances that fit into our own plans. It's easy to say those things that suit us and listen to those things that please us and at the same time to close our ears to things that displease us and to speak out against those things we don't like.

But this is the root of anger: my demand for what I want when I want it. Anger lies in my frustration when the world and other people, and let's face it, even God, war against my rights, my freedoms, my desires, my plans, my life, me. And we feel the only way the world can be made right is to take control of things and to rage against anything that stands in the way: "If God isn't going to sort it out, if the government isn't going to sort it out, if the boss isn't going to sort it out, / will sort it out." In light of this, it's not hard to see why anger does not lead to the righteousness of God or why Jesus equates anger with murder in the Sermon on the Mount.

In the kingdom of God, righteousness does not equate with my rights as it does in the kingdom of me. In the kingdom of God, it is God's righteousness that rules. God's justice. Every good gift comes down from Him. Not only to you, but also to everyone else. When you open your mouth too hastily against your neighbor or close your ears to him too soon, when your sense of your justice leads to an outburst of anger, you are setting up your justice against your neighbor. And when you do that, you are taking the place of God, who is the Creator and Judge of all things.

By the same token, when you keep silence for the sake of your own comfort, when you keep quiet while God's name is blasphemed or while God's people are trampled on, you are shutting out God from your world for your temporary comfort. This

world, after all, is one that He gave to you as a gift. And so to us all God in His word is saying, Repent.

But what is this righteousness of God of which the Scriptures speak? What is this righteousness of God which we're supposed to choose over our own anger and over our own speaking of our own mind? It is nothing other than the moral universe that God has created. It's a moral universe where good gifts come down from the creator of heaven and earth, who "opens his hand to satisfy the desire of every living thing" and lets the sun shine and the rain fall on the just and evil alike. It is a moral universe where God remains without variation or shadow due to change even as His own creation turns against Him and robs Him of His glory and honor.

Above all, it's a universe where God speaks and goes on speaking. He sows and goes on sowing His word of truth into a mankind possessed by the father of lies and their own lies. Where God tenaciously continues to deliver His own promise, even while it is constantly being rejected and ignored. Where the Father of light who brought light into the world continues to shine his light into the dark recesses of a dying world. Where the Father of life and the prince of peace continues to speak peace to a world at war within itself and against its Creator.

Because God is righteous, because God is concerned with establishing His righteousness, He is willing to waive his rights to be rid of every offense against His holiness, and instead He descends to our defiled, rebellious world in order to fill it with His own holiness by bringing His life-giving Word into our unhearing ears and the healing touch of the body and blood of His Son into our unclean mouths, so that He

might plant life and holiness, open stopped ears, and make clean what is unclean, where death and defilement formerly reigned.

By this self-giving, life-implanting righteousness of God, by this establishing of God of His own will, you also have been brought into a new life. Having had your souls saved by His gracious, condescending love in Christ Jesus, who though He had every right to destroy the unbelieving and godless you, as He destroyed the unbelieving world in the time of Noah, drowned your sinful nature, not in order to destroy you, but in order to bring you new life. He who had every right and a perfect freedom to be rid of you with your hasty tongue and your selective ears and your self-seeking temper. Instead, He planted His Word in your ears and placed it on your tongue and gave you His Holy Spirit so that you might become not a child of the father of lies but of God, who is truth.

In Christ Jesus and in Christ Jesus alone this life is yours now and eternally. The supreme, unmerited gift from the Father of light, next to which all of His other goods, including your rights and freedoms, pale in insignificance, it is by this self-giving life of God that you can have confidence, that you live and you will live and that your life cannot be taken from you by anything or anyone, whatever they do to you in this world. It is by this self-giving life of God that you live.

And into self-giving life you have been called. You are children of God. Once you were like the rest of mankind, fending for yourselves in this dog-eat-dog world. But now you have no need for such self-preservation. Your heavenly Father cares for you and has promised every good gift to you, in its proper time, for as long as you need it, and He has promised you, above all, and this morning delivers to you personally into your ears a gift that cannot be taken away which is for now and forever in Jesus Christ.

We give thanks that in His righteousness God did not regard His rights or our responsibilities as the measure of His righteousness. He has taken our salvation into His hands entirely. In His hands our lives are now hidden with Christ in God and, come what way, however our lives turn out on this earth, we have already won the victory and we are simply enjoying the first taste of a life of everlasting joy and peace. May God guard you by His grace, continue to cause His Word to grow in your hearts, and lead you to live in that Word and by that Word, until all things are fulfilled in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Pastor Brent McGuire
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church