

“Deal With It”

James 5:13-20

September 27, 2009

Augustine, the fourth century Bishop of the Church in Hippo, Africa (modern-day Annaba, Algeria), said, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless till it rest in Thee.” This seems related to the much older rabbinical teaching that a man cannot be healed until he deals with his sins. The Jews had a basic tenet that we learned about in our midweek Bible classes earlier this year. Yes, I am about to quiz my students once again. This is not a rhetorical question; I am somewhat eager to know if things I have taught by saying over and over again and giving examples from scripture and life actually soak in. So if you know the answer, say it out loud. Here we go...

What is the name of the code wherein it is stated that if you do good, you will receive blessing and if you do evil, you will receive curse? If you need a hint, recall that I referred to it as more of a principle than a formula.

Well, I'd hoped more had remembered but that's the way it goes in seminary classes too. The professors always hope more students know the answers than it turns out do, so you are, I suppose, in excellent company. It doesn't only happen in Church Bible classes that students don't recall the answers at quiz time.

The answer to my question is *the Deuteronomistic code* or more precisely, if you listened closely, the Deuteronomistic *principle*. This principle states that God will bless those who do good and curse those who do evil. The early paragraphs of Deuteronomy 28 spell it out and give examples.

Job and other places in scripture give exceptions to the rule. But it is a rule nonetheless. God gets to break his own rules, if there is a greater purpose in doing so. For example, Job's religious actions caused him to think, at least somewhat, that his religion was the source of his blessing. This is always a danger. God however—though he was proud of Job's devotion—wanted more than mere religion for Job. So he broke his “rule” to get to the “principle” within the rule. Religion is supposed to bring us face-to-face with God, not simply make us religious or even better people. This principle within the Deuteronomistic “rule” is at the heart of today's New Testament and Gospel lessons and the object of my sermon.

We heard the disciples in Mark 9:38-50 tell Jesus that they were ostracizing people who didn't follow them. They were not at all concerned about people following Jesus or even teaching Jesus. Their concern was that some fellow they had encountered was casting out demons and doing so in Jesus' name—but wasn't following *them!* (Mar 9:38) This is what happens immediately in what is only religion. *Do it our way or hit the highway.* The disciples had to be corrected right away. This isn't to say that there is not sometimes a heresy in the ranks that must be addressed, but if somebody is a Baptist or a Lutheran instead of a Quaker, well, “the one who is not against us is for us.” (Mar 9:40)

Then Jesus gets to the core of their problem—and it was the problem they had always displayed. They wanted to be the leaders, the bosses, or what amounts to demigods or demons or the *ubermensch* (supermen) of others. They wanted to call the shots and in so doing, they were basically stating a new code—a demonic one—instead of the Deuteronomistic principle. *Do it my way or be cursed.* Sound familiar?

But even in religion, people who perfectly act out the religious code still get sick and die. This is because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom 2:12) And there you see that ultimately, the code works. You do evil, you get cursed; you sin, you die. But what about the sickness that precedes dying?

The week before I went on vacation, I worked over 70 hours for this church. That is fairly religious, wouldn't you say? Then I went on vacation and got sick. *Where's the fairness in that?! Job* would cry out. *I did what you wanted me to do and I get cursed.* Let me be honest with you: sometimes I feel just like Job did. Why doesn't our church grow more numerically? I've been faithful. I've taught people the word. I am faithful even when I don't feel like doing this anymore. Even in the face of adversity and supposed defeat, I persevere. So how come there are not more results? Where is the blessing?

Of course, I am making an example and can name for you blessing after blessing that has happened here in these past ten years of service to you and our Lord. But I can just as surely name the defeats. I wonder; are they defeats or should we call them curses? And if they are curses, how do we deal with them before God and his Church?

The Jews have long believed three things that are based on the aforementioned Deuteronomistic code. One, sickness is caused by sin in a person's life. That is why Job's so-called comforters or friends insisted Job had sinned. They believed the age-old teaching that if you're sick, and your loved ones died early, and your crops fail, and your cattle gets stolen, then you must have done something wrong—seriously wrong. And they believed this religiously. Job, on the other hand, believed just as religiously that he had done nothing wrong and therefore, God was in the wrong. He

did not say this out loud; but I imagine he was thinking it. Religion always thinks that way. It is faith that dares to think differently. And so my favorite prophet, Habakkuk, says—and I paraphrase like a good Midwesterner: Though apple trees do not blossom and there isn't a single red strawberry to be found, though the corn rots in the husk and the fields produce no wheat, though the cattle die in the fields and the milking barns dry up...I will shout the triumph of Yahweh, I will jump for joy in the God of my salvation. Lord Yahweh is my strength—not the fertile fields. It is he alone who makes me leap like a buck in the mountain passes. I walk with my God in the heights when all around me are sinking in depression. (Hab 3:17-19) That is faith! But for the moment, let us get back to religion.

The first tenet of the ancient rabbinical teaching, based on the Deuteronomistic code, was that if you seemed cursed you must have sinned. Second, if you wanted to be healed, you need to do two things. The first action was to confess your sins. This is where the New Testament lesson really comes into play. James, of course, knew the teachings of the rabbis. He had himself become a teacher. He was a student of Rabbi Jesus and would be teaching his lessons to his own disciples. So here we see this second tenet come into James' thoughts. Call on the elders or other righteous people and confess your sins. (Jam 5:16) That is the first half of the teaching. Before we go on with the second half, I want to stress the first half just a bit.

Some would throw out this notion of confession with the Roman Catholic bath water. But to do so is to throw out the baby (Judaism) as well. And to do that is to throw out Jesus. Of course, that would be nothing new to religion. Religious types are always trying to get rid of Jesus. Jesus knew that the casting out of some demons required prayer and others required fasting as well as

prayer. (Mat 17:21; Mar 9:29) Here we see that at least persistent sickness may require not only prayer but also confession. James seems to link suffering and sickness with prayer and confession. Now, I am not advocating that we open up a confessional booth in one of the unused Sunday school rooms, or that you go running to an elder in the Meeting every time you come down with a cold. Still, in early Methodism, the Wesley brothers met with the movement a few times each week to, amongst other things, “confess their faults to one another.” (Lee, James Wideman; Luccock, Naphtali; Dixon, James Main, *The Illustrated History of Methodism*, 85) And no—before you ask it—I am also not advocating confession of sins in Monthly Meetings or Yearly Meetings...though it may do a great deal of good.

So what am I saying? For one, that faith is serious business—much more than our religion typically allows. And for another, that there are sometimes reasons for our illnesses that transcend sneezes, coughs, and lack of rest. Sometimes our illnesses are not just the cold and flu or even cancer and heart disease. At times our illnesses may not even be physical at all. They may be mental or even spiritual. Paul teaches that the whole being is to be made holy, the whole person including spirit, soul, and body. (1Th 5:23) Sometimes our sicknesses are not just physical and perhaps those are the very ones that require fasting and confession along with prayer. Actually, I am not simply suggesting the possibility; I am telling you a spiritual truth. Even more, I will insist to you that these afflictions are ordained of God.

God will stop at nothing to get you out of your religion and back into a right relationship with him. Job’s story (and there are others) proves that is true. So if you are sick or find yourself someday getting ill, in fact sicker and sicker, you may do well to do a little self-diagnosis. Ask

yourself, *Why am I sick? Why am I tormented? Why does everything I touch fall apart?* If you do suspect your actions may be at the root of your illness, you should do this self-diagnostic sooner rather than later because what you have may be contagious. Your illness may spread to your children, your spouse, your friends, and even your church. We affect those around us—no matter how self-righteous we try to make ourselves. Just ask Job’s family if that isn’t the case. Job was not restored to God, nor were his family and fortune restored, until he confessed his sins before both God and man. Notice who was present when he said he was in the wrong. Along with Yahweh were Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu. Sometimes, for serious spiritual defects to be dealt with, confession must also be made to men and women—particularly those whom we have sinned against. There is no other way to deal with it. You cannot get around it with religion or rationalization. Truth and confession are necessary to drive away some evil spirits.

But the third tenet of James’, Jesus’, and the rabbis’ teaching is another that you cannot get around. You must not only deal with yourself in admission of sin and with others in confession of it, you must also deal with God if you are going to deal with sin-sickness. And so, you must pray. You cannot stop with what you can do; you must ultimately rely on what God can do. This is done in the prayer closet. When you have admitted that something is wrong and that you may be or are the cause, and have confessed your participation or even collusion, then pray. Perhaps pray with fasting just to err on the side of serious faith. But prayer is not just for the sinner. Indeed, it seems especially suited to those who are righteous and seasoned in the faith. Pray, fast, and believe in the power of God that mysteriously acts through your prayers. Tennyson wrote, “Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer/Than this world dreams of.” (Van Dyke, Henry Jackson, *An Introduction to*

*the Poems of Tennyson*, 89) James knew this and reminds us of Elijah's powerful supplications.

The Lord caused it to rain after a drought that lasted three and a half years. But he did so only after the prophet had prayed. Is there a condition you know of that affects many, a spiritual dryness or even a drought? Deal with it! Do some soul-searching. Confess what God reveals—at least to him and in very serious cases to the ones you have wronged and to those who are able to help you recover. And if you are aware of someone else's sickness, pray for all God is worth. Your prayers may restore that person to a right relationship to God and his Church, just as Elijah's prayer restored the rain. Elijah's prayer restored the balance of nature. Your prayers may restore a soul to the Kingdom.