

“God’s been good to you. You should be good to others.” If I summarized today’s second reading that way for you, there wouldn’t be any argument, but to pick up the Letter of James is to pick up a heap of controversy.

First, it doesn’t seem to be much of a letter. It doesn’t follow the style we find in the classic letters of Paul, for example, with an opening, a closing, and sections devoted to specific questions from a particular church. Instead, it more resembles a speech, a pep talk to live a good life. Today’s passage says, “Be doers of the word and not hearers only.” That pretty much sums up the whole book.

Then there is the problem of the author. This book claims to be written by somebody named James. We guess that’s the one called “the brother of the Lord” throughout the New Testament. There are at least two other people named James, both listed among the Twelve. After Jesus died, James the brother of the Lord became leader of the church in Jerusalem, which was no small position. If he were around today he’d be attending summits with Ehud Barak, Yasser Arafat, the Pope, and the President of the United States. However, James had no formal education, and the book that bears his name is written in a very educated manner. The author knows the writings of Paul, but those were not collected until after James had died. It’s likely then that this book was composed for an early church community for whom James had special significance, and the author used his name as a way of showing authority -- kind of the way you hear people say, “The pope says this,” even though it may have been said by a Roman congregation, a local bishop, the chair of a parish council, or your mother.

So, if this book is not a letter, and if it’s not by James, does it belong in the bible? Most everybody answers yes, Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants alike. We all have James in our bibles. Martin Luther thought this book was not among the main books of the bible because it did not sufficiently proclaim Jesus Christ. James comes across more like a beloved uncle, giving you advice on how to live your life. James also appears to disagree with Paul on the question of justification, and that too caused Luther problems with the book. Nevertheless, Lutherans and Catholics agree today that this book belongs in the bible.

And no one argues with the basic thought we hear today, taken from the first chapter: James says all good gifts come from heaven above, a line made famous in a song from *Godspell*. that God is the father of lights; that is, that God created the sun, the moon, and the stars. But even though those heavenly bodies appear and disappear, God remains constant. God gave birth to all creation by the divine word, and now God has given birth to the Christian community by the divine word as well. Therefore, James says, live by that word. “Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls. Be doers of the word and not hearers only.” As examples of doing the word he suggests care for orphans and widows, and keeping oneself unstained by the world.

So, to sum up, God’s been good to you. You should be good to others. We should not let petty arguments get in the way of hearing that word and doing it.