

Being Doers of the Word – James 5:4 by Reverend Jerry Folk Past ICWJ Board Member

“Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.” James 5:4

Christian teaching often gets caught up in abstract philosophical speculation, losing contact with concrete situations and circumstances. This tendency to interpret Christian faith in abstract philosophical categories appears from time to time already in the New Testament, particularly in books influenced by Hellenism like the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul. In the book of James, however, there is none of this speculation. James addresses very concrete, down to earth concerns in a very practical way, one reflecting a more Jewish than Hellenistic way of understanding Christian faith.

Some scholars believe this is because the book was written by a Jew to a Christian community made up of Jews at a very early time in the history of Christianity—perhaps as early as the 40’s CE. At that time almost all Christians were Jews and Christianity understood itself and was understood by others to be a sect of Judaism. Other scholars suggest that James expresses himself in such a Jewish manner because he is using the frame of thought and sometimes the very language of another Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. For example there are many echoes of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in this Epistle. The main theme of this book, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (James 1:22), is an important theme in that sermon and throughout Jesus’ ministry, second in importance only to his emphasis on the compassion, mercy, forgiveness and love of God. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells the crowd, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the Kingdom of God, but only the one who **does** the will of my Father in heaven.” And in Mark 3 he says, “Whoever **does** the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” Whatever the reason for the Jewish manner in which James expresses himself, it makes his book particularly useful in addressing the issue of worker justice in the Church and the world.

What is the will of God? Both Jesus and James make it abundantly clear that for them “Doing the will of God” does not mean primarily engaging in religious rituals and activities, supporting religious causes, or subscribing to the proper beliefs with the hope of getting to heaven. For them doing the will of God means trusting in God, loving kindness and doing justice here on earth, in this life. That is what God requires of us.

There are many ways to practice justice on earth, but perhaps none is more important than ensuring that workers, that is people who make their living through physical or intellectual labor, are respected and treated justly, since the vast majority of people in the world fall into this category. James and many other biblical authors, including the Hebrew prophets, believe that all workers have a **God-given right** to a just wage, safe and humane working conditions, and time for life with their families and friends; that they have a God-given right to a life of dignity with some measure of comfort and security.

How can politicians and corporate boards who exploit workers to advance themselves or improve the bottom line for their stockholders claim to be practicing justice or doing the will of

God? And how can those of us, who fail to oppose corporate or public policies that deny workers this God-given right or try to take it away from them when they have it, claim to be doing justice or serving God, no matter how religious or charitable we may be, no matter how loudly and publicly we piously say “Lord, Lord”?

In the end, of course, the point is not to write or do a Bible study. At best that’s a first step that will motivate us to act. And that’s the point—to be **Doers** and not mere hearers of the Word.

Discussion Questions:

What can we do to support and advance justice for workers?

What can we do in our churches, synagogues and mosques?

What can we do in the political arena?

What can we do in our own places of work?

Prayer:

Fill us with your tender mercy and awaken in us a love of justice. Make us doers of the Word, not hearers only. Give us courage to speak the Truth, as we are given to know it, boldly and humbly in the Church and the world, that justice may roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. We ask this with confidence, for we know that you are gracious and the Lover of humankind.

Quote to ponder:

This quote from a sermon of St. John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople in 400, is typical of the teaching of many Christian leaders in the 4th and 5th centuries. It is quoted from Julio de Santa Ana’s book, *Good News to the Poor*, Orbis books, 1979, p. 71

“But let us [...] turn to [...] those who occupy the fields and extract the wealth of the land [...] If you look at how they treat the brave but miserable laborers, you will see that they are more cruel than the barbarians. They make continual and unbearable demands on those who are wracked with hunger and spend their lives working, and force them to do the hardest work. They treat them like asses or mules, or rather like stone, and allow not a moment’s rest. Whether or not the land produces, they oppress them just the same, and pardon them nothing.”

St. John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople