



# PILGRIM PAPERS

Mt. Zion Lutheran Church

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February 2025

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## **The Letter of James: The Importance of Discipleship**

"[It is] an epistle of straw compared to the others [Gospel of John and Paul's letters], for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it." This is what Martin Luther wrote about the book of James. He didn't think the writer's points were well argued and was clearly a letter of far less importance in the New Testament, because it only refers to Jesus twice and says nothing about the crucifixion or resurrection. For Martin Luther, the central theme of his life was pointing to the cross of Christ, emphasizing that only God can save us (not our efforts) through the gift of faith in Jesus. In contrast, the letter of James says that "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (James 2:17).

Considering Martin Luther himself did not value the book of James, at least not in comparison to the Gospels and Paul's letters, why would we spend time on it during the season of Lent?

While I agree with Martin Luther that James is not a helpful book on the topic of salvation, that doesn't mean that James does not have a very important point to make to the Church. Reading all five chapters, the major theme across the book is that the author is scolding any Christian who would claim they have holiness in their heart but fail to do the practical work of loving God and loving their neighbors in their everyday activities. **James values discipleship.** "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." (James 1:27)

In the season of Lent, a time when Christians around the globe focus on self-reflection, repentance, and how the Spirit is growing good fruit in us, the book of James might be the sermon we need in order to focus on everyday acts of faith. As Lutherans, we still boldly proclaim that only grace through faith in Christ can save us. But James is a helpful reminder that while God does not need our good works as proof of our worthiness, our neighbors do need our good works. The love of Christ lived out in everyday life is true wisdom.

Be sure to come every Wednesday in Lent at 6:15pm for a soup supper and Holden Evening Prayer at 7:00pm. We will be reading through the Letter of James each week. We will begin on March 12<sup>th</sup>.

## **Christian Virtues: What Makes Your List?**

Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers spent a lot of time thinking about virtue, those qualities or characteristics that make up the ideal man (the Greeks and Romans thought women were "lesser humans" and so never considered them). Early Christians were influenced by those philosophers, but with a major difference. Instead, they asked "What virtues, or qualities, best reflect the light of Christ Jesus?"

If you had to make a list of Christian virtues or Christian qualities, what would you include? Our current American culture is obsessed with personality traits, and there are endless quizzes out there that claim they can analyze and describe everything that makes you tick as a person. But if we were to make a "Christian personality chart" what do you think should be on it?

Obviously, the Bible gives us a good start to our list. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 about the all-importance of Christian love and ends with this in verse 13: "*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*" Clearly, on any list of Christian traits or virtues, love should be the number one entry. In fact, love sums up all the other virtues that will come later on our list. Something else to remember is that these three virtues are a gift from God through the Holy Spirit. We can't achieve faith, hope, and love, but instead we live out these virtues through God's free gift of grace.

With faith, hope, and love as the top Christian virtues, are there others that should be on our list? One list of Christian virtues from the 5<sup>th</sup> century listed the following: chastity, endurance, humility, sobriety, reason, wisdom, devotion, peace, and harmony. By the medieval era, most Christian writers had edited the list to the following: humility, kindness, temperance, charity, chastity, patience, and diligence. Do any of these traits resonate with you as important to the Christian life? Remember that Lutherans believe that we aren't trying to EARN our spot in heaven. Instead, living a life of Christian virtues is about showing love to God IN RESPONSE to our salvation, and showing love to our neighbors, living out the Kingdom of God during our life.

If I were to make my own list, I might include discernment, which means carefully considering what might be from the Holy Spirit and what might not. It also involves deciding between right and wrong, truth and lies. My modern-day list of Christian virtues would also include empathy, which means we try to understand people from their own point of view, entering into their feelings and experiences.

The season of Lent is a season of self-reflection and discipline. As Christians, we take this time to seriously consider in what ways we fall short of the glory of God, repent, and ask for the Holy Spirit to grow virtue in us. What virtue or trait do you think needs growing in you? And what activities or disciplines could you adopt for Lent to help you focus on it?

## **Prayer Practices for Lent**

When you pray on your own, what do you normally do? Do you talk to God in your own mind? Or do you reach for a written prayer from a devotion book? Or maybe you just sit quietly and let your mind drift?

There are a million ways to pray! There are no "correct techniques" to prayer. Instead, every Christian is encouraged to pray in a way that resonates with them. The point to prayer is to simply spend time with God, listening to the Holy Spirit's voice, giving God our attention, and reflecting on our lives in the light of Christ Jesus.

For those of you who are more practical, your next question might be, "Ok, that sounds nice. But how do you do that?" The good news is that in two thousand years of Christian history, Christians have recommended different types of prayer. The following list isn't all-encompassing. But you might consider trying at least one of these during the season of Lent.

Home Altar or Prayer Closet- Sometimes our surroundings can either distract us or help us focus. If you struggle to shut out the rest of the world and all your responsibilities, you may want to prioritize setting up your own prayer space at home. This could be as simple as a candle and religious artwork on a spare table in the corner of the room. But if you are still struggling to focus, consider turning a small room or closet into a prayer space. Historically, the word "closet" referred to any small personal room. Only later did it become a room for hanging clothes. In a corner, room, or even a clothes closet, set up a chair, a lamp, a few religious pictures, and then spend at least thirty minutes in quiet prayer and reflection. You could read a devotional book, Scripture, the Small Catechism, or say your own prayers.

Prayer Beads and Prayer Coloring Books- Are you the fidgety type? Are you constantly fiddling with pens, paper, keys, or anything else on hand? Prayer can be challenging when so much of your energy is put into simply sitting still. Instead of fighting the fidgets, there are ways to pray that embrace it. Christians of all types have used prayer beads since ancient times to count their prayers. But it is also a great way to keep your fingers occupied and your mind focused. You could use a traditional Roman Catholic rosary or make your own chain of beads. Use the beads to help you count the number of times you pray the Lord's Prayer, lines from the Psalms, the Apostles and Nicene Creed, or other verses from Scripture. Or you could simply pray prayers in your own words and fidget with the beads. In the same way, coloring books are a good way to keep your hands busy. You could listen to hymns or religious audio-books while you color!

Pray while you work or walk- Perhaps you are more than fidgety and struggle to stop moving all day long. My momma always says that "some people don't idle very well". Like a car in high gear, you can't stay still long enough to say quiet prayers while sitting down. In that case, it is time to try praying while you move your body. Spend five minutes reading a verse from Scripture and try to memorize it. Then, while you go about your chores for the day, repeat the verse over in your mind. While you are cleaning the house, cooking dinner, chopping wood, tending the garden, or simply walking through the park, the repetition of the Bible verse will become part of the rhythm of your work. You can do the same thing with hymn verses, the Lord's Prayer, the Creeds, and the Small Catechism.

Too anxious? Try the "Breath Prayer"- Many people struggle with worries and anxieties. The headline news can be horrifying and crises in our own lives take over our thoughts and hold us hostage. Something that I have found incredibly helpful for my own prayers in the midst of worries is the traditional "Breath Prayer". Early Christians wondered how they might "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17). To that end, they developed a prayer timed with the human breath, so that as a person goes about their day, they repeat over and over again a prayer with each inhale and exhale. If you want to give it a try, you can use any phrase, but the traditional prayer is to repeat in your mind (inhale) "Lord Jesus Christ" (exhale) "have mercy on me, a sinner".

Looking for even more prayer practices or a devotion book? Check out this list or be sure to ask Pr. Kristen for resources!

- Bread for the Day: Daily Bible Readings and Prayers, Year C 2025 -Published by Augsburg Fortress

- Lent Madness 2025 published by Forward Movement (Episcopal Church). Free copies in our church narthex!
- Praying with Beads: Daily Prayers for the Christian Year By: Virginia Stem Owens, Nan Doerr Owens -Carried online by several Christian bookstores
- Praying the Catechism, Revised and Expanded Edition by **Donald W. Johnson** (Author) **and Susan C. Johnson**- published by Augsburg Fortress
- Stretch and Pray: A Daily Discipline for Physical and Spiritual Wellness by **Murray D. Finck** (Author) published by Augsburg Fortress

*"Let my prayer rise up as incense before you, the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice." Psalm 141:2*