

For today's reflection, I want to further develop an idea presented in my previous reflection. In my last reflection, I emphasized the importance of maintaining our "Christian identity" amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The Christian calling is to *care for others*, not to serve ourselves. The Christian church's identity is undergoing radical changes because Christians have to find new ways to care for the world. How do we fulfill that calling during this pandemic? I believe the Book of James can help us further understand our calling so that we can develop newfound ways to care for the world.

Although contemporary Christianity cannot fathom the New Testament without the Book of James, there have been several persons throughout history that have called for its removal from the canon. Many wanted to see the Book of James removed from the Bible on account of the text's emphasis on "works." James' statement that "faith without works is also dead" has caused theological complications for advocates of the "faith alone" position (James 2:26, NRSV). However, the more I read the Book of James, the more I am thankful for its inclusion in the New Testament. I am not thankful because it makes me feel "warm and fuzzy." My thankfulness stems from the convicting nature of this text. The Book of James does not make people feel "warm and fuzzy"; rather, it convicts people. James reminds people that actions matter and are central to one's relationship with God and humankind. Moreover, the Book of James challenges persons to care for the marginalized—persons who are especially suffering amidst this pandemic.

As mentioned last week, James addresses an "exilic audience"—recipients of persecution on account of their faith. However, despite their oppression, James does not instruct the audience to forgo their identity to avoid persecution. Rather, James instructs the audience to serve others, especially the powerless.

To fully develop this concern for the powerless, James uses strong language and convictions to grasp the reader's attention. James calls attention to materialism, claiming that riches and luxuries of this world will "perish" and "wither away" (James 1:11). As opposed to receiving, James challenges people to perform "every generous act of giving" (James 1:17). Religions, according to James, must care for the powerless. Religions that don't fulfill this obligation are, in his mind, "worthless" (James 1:26-27). Furthermore, James says that the rich should not

receive favor over the poor. In chapter 5, James expresses his disappointment in persons who prioritize their riches or pleasures over those in need. James' controversial statement— "faith without works is also dead"—has this care for the marginalized in its backdrop. James' concern for ethics is not another form of legalism; rather, James' concern for ethics stems from a desire to care for others.

James' message to care for the powerless seems especially important in the midst of the current pandemic. Although my comfort and normalcy have been challenged, I would not consider myself an "oppressed" person. My immediate needs have been met. However, many persons are now experiencing turmoils on account of this pandemic. Many persons have lost their jobs or their sense of financial security. Many persons have closed their businesses or have turned down significant opportunities. Those with underlying health concerns are at more of a risk. Moreover, the powerless—those who struggled before the pandemic—are now undergoing even more trials. Many are suffering and require help. How can the church meet the requirements of the marginalized in this current climate?

I have been encouraged by some of the responses to this challenge. Some are buying and delivering groceries for persons who otherwise would have gone without. Some are going above-and-beyond in the congregation to ensure that online services can reach those in need. While others are minimizing the likelihood of spreading the virus by observing social distancing and following other safety procedures. In these unprecedented times, Christians must find new ways to fulfill our biblical mandate to serve others. Despite the audience's circumstances, James still charged the audience to serve the powerless. Despite our current circumstances, we are still obligated to care for others. The Book of James reminds us that our identity transcends time and circumstances. Christians must care for others no matter the circumstances.



