

Study Guide September 30, 2018

Readings: Ester 7:1—10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20 (James 1-5); Mark 9:38-50

Theme: Mind your own self, it's your faith at stake.

"Mind your own self!" Jesus says in so many words. This might seem like a strange theme, but hey...the reading is a bit strange. Although, it is also very straightforward. In essence, take a look at what you are doing before you judge or point the finger. We live in a time where it's become so easy to put the blame on everyone or everything else. And as a result it seems as if our faith has become a bit lazy (perhaps judgmental and arrogant as well). Lazy faith doesn't build up the Kingdom of God, but instead impedes its growth and prosperity.

Our readings show us various ways we ought to look at ourselves, our faith, and our faithfulness. It invites us to take a deeper, more meaningful look at where God is in our lives and how we are allowing God to work through us, in the way we exercise our faith – even if God's name is never mentioned people will still sense the divine presence within us. This week we must look within our own self because our faith and our faithfulness is at stake!

READ: Ester 7:1—10; 9:20-22

The book of Ester is an enigma. For Christ followers it is a little known book in the Bible, and yet it serves as the narrative source for Purim, the most joyous festival of the Jewish year. Its religious meaning is sometimes questioned in that the name of God is not even mentioned in it, and there are moral ambiguities even among the heroic characters. Yet Ester conveys a message that is consistent with the entire biblical witness: the survival and salvation of God's people, remembered and redeemed through a celebrative gathering.

Q: What part of this passage spoke directly to you? What new thing(s) did you learn or take away from this excerpt?

Q: How might Ester's life encourage you to live out your faith more faithfully?

Prayer: Lord God, you have sent us prophets and prophetess to reveal your truth, please help me to see and understand a new part of you today. Amen.

READ: James 5:13-20 (James 1-5)

These are the last eight verses in James' letter, in which James encourages all believers to take our faith into our own hands (and into each other's hands) so this congregation will get back into alignment with the wisdom of God. I encourage you to reread the entire letter to refresh your memory. The wisdom of the world has led this congregation into all kinds of trouble, not least of which are the divisions that sin and sickness have caused.

God has entrusted us with the church's/community's care. One of the most important gifts we can offer is prayer, which seems to be the overarching theme of this passage. James also asks us to call upon the elders for anointing and healing. We receive these very actionable requests: "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another," and "bring back a sinner from wandering."

Q: How might your prayer be best described in this final passage? Do they possess the power to heal others? Are they cheerful? Do they sing God's praise?

Q: In what ways are you taking control of your faith?

Q: What part of this passage spoke directly to you?

Prayer: Lord Christ, awaken in me the power of your glory. Amen.

READ: Mark 9:38-50; Luke 9:49-50; Matthew 18:6-11

A strong community enhances the lives of its members. It provides protection and support, shapes the values and provides cultural norms. It does not (or should not) cause harm. To follow Jesus is to begin a journey where our faith and faithfulness are contemplated.

Jesus gives us a piece of that roadmap. First, the well-known, "Whoever is not against us is for us," warning us to avoid looking for reasons to make enemies. Then, a dramatic and thorough drama about the more perilous parts of the journey. There may be temptation on the way, but stay the course and sacrifice anything to persist in the journey. Your faith is at stake! Winding up in heaven without an eye, hand, or foot is still better than wandering around for eternity. The third piece that is the hardest to interpret, but I'm saving that for next week. Suffice it to say, maybe Jesus is hinting that the best way to get to heaven is to start living now like we are already there.

Q: Jesus talks about entering into life and the kingdom of God, not heaven. How would this change your choices and behaviors if heaven could actually begin in this life?

Q: List the stumbling blocks in your life, and how would you give them over to God?

Q: What would you like Jesus to cut out of your life so that you can live in the Kingdom of God now?

Prayer: Blessed Holy Spirit, search my heart and cleanse me of all my sins so that I might start this day out right. Amen.

Slow Read: Psalm 124 and think about how it speaks to your faith and faithfulness in God who created heaven and earth and everything in it, including you.