

HEARING AND DOING THE WORD

Bible Background – JAMES 1:19-27

Printed Text – JAMES 1:19-27

¹⁹ Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.

²⁰ Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires.

²¹ So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.

²² But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.

²³ For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror.

²⁴ You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like.

²⁵ But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

²⁶ If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.

²⁷ Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

-----New Living Translation

Lesson Introduction

We often hear phrases such as “Actions speak louder than words” or “talking a good game” implying that one is not living up to the principles one espouses. In this passage that is the basis of today's lesson, James challenges Christians to live up to godly principles in our everyday actions. It is not enough to merely “hear the word.” As representatives of Christ in our sphere of influence, we must be intentional to do those things that show compassion for others.

Background: James, the half-brother of Jesus, was among the early leaders of the church and was based in Jerusalem. Although the epistle of James is placed toward the end of the New Testament, it is actually the first letter of instruction written to the church—thus the first book of the New Testament written. The primary audience for this epistle was the Christian Jews spread across the world due to persecution in Jerusalem and Rome because of their faith in Christ. The major theme of James' letter is viewed as a book of wisdom and instruction for Jewish believers. James appealed for his fellow believers to join outward actions with their inward faith. Scholars believe that James wrote this epistle in the mid-40s AD around the time of the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15). He was one of the first martyrs of the church, executed in AD 62.

-----*Precepts for Living*, the UMI Annual Commentary 2019-2020, p. 573

Behaving the Word

James 1:19-20: James has written this letter to Christian Jews at a time when believers are facing persecution for their faith in Jesus Christ. At the same time, a zeal for rebellion against the oppressive Roman Empire was also sweeping the region. While many were being influenced by the zealots towards anger and violence against Rome, James warns believers about getting caught up in the hostility of the moment. He writes to remind them that they are children of God the Father and righteous Judge. Their actions and lives must reflect a very different message that is at work within them. To respond in their own anger will inhibit the development of God's righteous work in them.

James reminds them of the wisdom literature recorded by the scribes and passed down by oral tradition in their synagogues and homes. "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty," (Prov. 16:32, KJV). "Where there are many words, transgression is unavoidable," (Prov. 10:19, NAS). He also reminds them of Jesus' teachings of how to handle anger by not repaying violence with violence (Matthew 5:38-41). James' message is to be led by the wisdom of God and to remain Spirit-led in the midst of trials. Control emotions and limit anger! Then we will make good decisions and glorify God.

◆ *In your adult life, have you remembered or been reminded of a lesson you learned from when you were a child?*

Living by the Word

James 1:21-25: James continues this discourse by offering more instruction on how the believer should manage their emotions and not respond to pressure and stressors as the world would naturally respond. He tells the believer to put away worldly behaviors and belief systems--described in the KJV as "filthiness" (Greek *rhuparia* meaning defilement or dishonor) and "superfluity of naughtiness" (Greek *kakia*, meaning malice, ill will, intent to harm). Believers can achieve this only through the transforming power of the Word, placed in the heart by Holy Spirit.

But if you "hear" the word and neglect to act on the godly wisdom you hear, the believer is only kidding themselves. Here James offers an interesting analogy. He compares such a person to one who looks into a mirror, sees the reflection and goes away forgetting the reflection that was just seen. In the days that this passage was written, mirrors were not made of glass as they are today. They were made of Corinthian brass which gave a distorted image. Therefore, when looking into such a mirror, an individual could come away with an inaccurate image of how they truly appear. The reflection deceives. But the believer must see the word of God as their mirror and use the reflection of Jesus Christ as a reminder of what we are to become. Only then can the believer show to others, the true representation of our Lord and Savior. Believers should be a reflection of Christ as we grow in the knowledge of Him. We must study diligently, pray fervently and obey quickly.

◆ *How have you seen or heard of people blaming Christians for not living out their faith?*

Representing the Word

James 1:26-27: What does true religion look like? Regularly attending church? Paying tithes? Serving in ministry? Perhaps it does look like all of these things. But James tells us that if our practices and behavior do not come from a transformed heart and our desire to serve God out of loving devotion to him, we are fooling ourselves. Verse 26 reads thusly, from the Message, “Anyone who sets himself up as ‘religious’ by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air.”

James further explains that true religion is shown by how we care for those who are helpless to care for themselves. This is the fruit of our true beliefs. In Psalm 68:5 God identifies himself as the God of the fatherless and the widow. So, to take actions that care for widows and orphans is one way to demonstrate that the religion that one has is pure. The word translated “pure” is from the Greek word *katharos* which means free from corrupt desire, sin, and guilt. Thus, James admonishes that the other way to show evidence of pure religion is to remain free from the corruption of a godless world.

Conclusion

All of us, at some point in time, have been guilty of talking a good game when it comes to living up to the godly principles we profess. This can happen for a variety of reasons—we can get too busy with our everyday lives and neglect to be intentional about the needs in our sphere of influence. But James calls us to not simply be hearers but doers of the word that God has imprinted on our hearts. Let us be mindful to listen to God’s instruction through daily bible study, personal devotion time and through the preached Word. We must make a conscious effort to assess our speech and behavior to assure that all that we do is aligned with God’s word. And we must also be patient with ourselves. When we miss the mark, repent, yield to His word and know that God hears and is working to transform your heart to become a pure reflection of our Lord and Savior.

Sources:

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Lesson for Next Week – August 16, 2020 – Study Guide 11

Faith Without Works is Dead

Bible Background ♦ JAMES 2:14-26

Printed Text ♦ JAMES 2:14-26

Devotional Reading ♦ MATTHEW 18:23-35