



The Letters of James and Peter

Week 2 – James 1:19-3:18

Day 1 - James 1:19-27

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Understanding the Passage:

The second part of this passage is a precursor to the greater faith vs. works discussion that will follow. James begins to make the point that you cannot just hear (and presumably understand) the gospel message; you have to also act on it. Faith that is based solely on understanding and doesn't have any action is compared to immediately forgetting what you look like after glancing in a mirror – there is no longevity. This echoes Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about those who hear the word and don't do anything – they might as well have built their houses on sand. Their whole spiritual foundation is on shaky ground, and it is easily washed away when bad things happen. But people that act on the word of God, those that live it out in their daily lives, have a stronger hold on their faith – it will carry them through hard times.

This strong faith that sustains us is the blessing to which James refers. We often think of blessings in material terms (like houses, jobs, and financial resources) but scripture tells us that the greatest blessing is the presence of God. The first benediction that we find in scripture comes from Aaron, Moses' brother, when he proclaims, "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon

you and be gracious to you.” The blessing is that the great God that created and sustains and deeply loves us turns towards us and is present with us. This happens when we are hearers AND doers, putting God’s word into practice.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- What are some of the ways people can deceive themselves?
- Is anger ever righteous or justified? Describe the circumstances, if so.
- Today’s passage instructs us to keep ourselves from being influenced and shaped by the world. How can you do that? What does that look like in your daily life?
- How have you been blessed with God’s presence?

Day 2 - James 2:1-13

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Understanding the Passage:

The reason that James really emphasized equal treatment is threefold: in this passage, he writes that favoritism is foolish (2:5-7), unlawful (2:8-11), and unmerciful (2:12-13). The culture of the world may tell you that the rich and powerful are more worthy, but Jesus tells us that the poor will inherit the kingdom of God because they are not preoccupied with their status. It is a foolish endeavor to cast your lot with people for the sake of their status, because status is not eternal. Often, it is not even lifelong – situations and circumstances change, leaving the potential for a quick shift in status.

It is also unlawful to show special treatment to only a select few. The number of times I have uttered the phrase, “well at least I am not a cheater/murderer/tax evader/abuser/thief” in order to justify in my mind some other sin I am guilty of committing is astounding and embarrassing. In this passage, James tells us that categorizing sin so that it falls in a ranking of “kind of bad” to “really, really bad” misses the point entirely. The folks to whom James was writing were shunning the poor, but justifying it to themselves by saying they keep the other laws. But James tells them, “look, if you break this law [caring for the poor], you are a law-breaker... no two ways about it.”

Finally, and most importantly, choosing the rich over the poor demonstrates a lack of compassion. Jesus' entire ministry was one of inclusion. He opened the circle wide and brought in tax-collectors, prostitutes, and the poor – people that were shunned by the church. The upside down kingdom is one in which these folks are as included, wanted, and beloved as the ones that our society deems acceptable.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- Who is deserving of favoritism in God's eyes?
- Why do we have a tendency to treat some people better than others?
- How does demonstrating favoritism illustrate a lack of mercy?
- Who might God be putting in your life right now that you have been ignoring because they are wearing metaphorical dirty clothes? What are you going to do to build a bridge to them?

Day 3 - James 2:14-26

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

Understanding the Passage:

I was once in conversation with a physician, and was whining about some controversy going on in the church. He responded, "you know, the human body could not work without tension. The arm will only bend because the muscle pulls a tendon, and that causes the tendon to pull against the bone. If there was nothing to pull against, nothing would work." There are so many tensions that keep the the body of Christ working – social v. individual, truth v. grace, constant v. dynamic.

In this passage, James addresses the tension between faith and works. The language in the letter indicates he has read the letters of Paul, as he uses much of the same terminology. And at first glance, it seems that faith and works are contradictory values. While Paul points us to faith as that which saves us, James points to good works – righteous acts of both piety and mercy -- as an essential part of the process of salvation. How do we resolve this tension?

Two responses: First, remember that letters are addressed to specific audiences. Paul is writing to "Judaizers," those who thought that by being religious and/or good people, they can attain a holiness acceptable to God. It appears that James is writing to a certain brand of Gnostic Christians, a group that arise in the first century. These Gnostics believed that if one has faith in Christ, one gains a "special knowledge," an internal experience that bring salvation, and which allows one to act in any way one chooses. So while James and Paul appear to pull against one another, they are writing to different audiences.

Second, James' point is that it isn't either/or; it is both/and. There is no such thing as faith without works. Faith by its very nature is transformative, and it changes the way we live, producing works. That outward transformation is the sign, the mark, the evidence of a living faith within the follower of Christ. We are to accept Christ as *savior* – receiving God's grace through faith, and as *Lord* – committing ourselves to living out that grace through good works, following the pattern of life he taught us to live.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection:

- Which of the oppositional forces tempt you the most – a Judaizer seeking to earn salvation, or an Gnostic who can choose any way of life?
- What are some ways that that our lives demonstrate a dead faith, without works?
- What are some ways that your way of life, your values and behaviors are significantly different because you have chosen Christ as Lord? Would you live any differently if you were not a Christ follower?

Day 4 - James 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Understanding the Passage:

Candy. Fried food. Soft drinks. Alcoholic beverages. Red meat. A quick poll of my friends revealed that the items above were the most common things they had given up for Lent. We are so concerned with experiencing sacrifice and honoring God that we often focus solely on what we put in - or don't put in - our mouths.

But what about the things that come out of our mouths? Do we realize the great hurt our words can cause? How often do we think about a harsh comment before it slips out?

And are we mindful of how a curse word can ruin our witness to a non-Christian friend? Poll after poll shows that many folks are turned off from Christianity because they find its followers hypocritical – often preaching about one thing and then saying other things. When we fail to control our tongue, we run the risk of turning people away from God.

Even with all of this in mind, the tongue has the potential to do great good. Today, focus on using your words to share Christ's love and to build others up. I challenge you to refrain from gossip, speak kindly to others in encouragement, and use your tongue to glorify God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- Why does James compare the tongue to a horse's bit or ship's rudder?
- Do you agree with James' assessment that the tongue is the hardest part of your body to control?
- Have you ever said something you shouldn't have and realized it hurt your ability to be a witness to your faith? How did you feel?
- Write about a time that someone's words built you up. Why were their words so powerful?

Day 5 - James 3:13-18

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Understanding the Passage:

We know that the world operates on a different standard than the one to which God calls us – everything from our attitudes in the face of trials to the people that we are to love is countercultural to the world. Here is yet another example of that difference – James describes the wisdom that comes from God as wisdom that brings about peace through gentleness, but wisdom from the world causes strife, envy, selfish ambition, disorder, and wickedness.

Ambition is not a bad thing. In fact, it is a marvelous trait... but only when it is directed in the right way. Being ambitious about building the kingdom, about making a dent in homelessness, about overturning oppressive systems, about making sure every empty belly is filled – there is a clarion call in scripture for followers of Jesus to be ambitious about these things. But these are not the types of ambition that James was writing about. The kind of ambition that he protests is ambition that only looks out for oneself: the kind that is focused on getting a certain promotion (maybe even at someone else's expense) or the kind that wants popularity more than anything else.

This kind of ambition is so self-focused that it won't let anything stand in its way... leading to envy and disunity. It makes it hard to cheer others on. Yet we know that building the kingdom of heaven is not something we can do alone or while we are in conflict. It requires us to set aside our own selfishness.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- What is the difference between the wisdom we learn from the world and the wisdom that James writes about in this passage?
- Why do envy and selfishness cause disorder and wickedness?
- Can you be jealous and wise at the same time?