

## *Working Out Our Faith*

James 1:19-27

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We continue in the letter of James as we look together at what it means to walk this life of faith. And this morning, we do so by looking at the end of chapter 1:19-27 as we consider faith in practice. Hear now, God's word, James 1:19-27.

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Again, please pray with me.

Now, we ask, Lord, by the power of your Holy Spirit that you would lead us in what it means to work out or faith. We cannot do it unless your Holy Spirit is at work. But you call us to respond, and you give us the strength and the power to do so. So, make us then receptive to your word and ready to respond and to act. Work this out in us for the glory of your name. It is in Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

Last week, we ended with verse 18 where James writes, "Of his own will, he," that is God, "brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures." What James is doing there is he's telling us something about what God has given to us. And what God has given to us is the word of truth. And one of the things that verse 18 says, which we looked at last week, is that God gives us birth through the word.

So, God is the giver of the word and He is the one who gives birth to us. As we looked at last week, what that was referring to is salvation that God brings us into His presence to enjoy salvation through the forgiveness of sins. And it has in it this very old word which is from the Latin "datum" which means "something given." And in that being something given, it is also used in engineering and surveying. It's also a starting point.

For James, the starting point is the gift, something to be received from God Himself who works salvation in us through His word of truth, and therefore, if He gives a gift, the datum, what follows for James and the Christian faith is mandatum. There is a command. There is a mandate. There is a response. If the starting point, which is God who gives the gift of salvation through His word, then we respond to that mandate and to live out this faith.

And so, for James where he begins with the birth by God through the word which is salvation, he then leads in these verses 19-27 this life from the implanted word, working out of the faith. What does a life of faith look like? What does it produce? What does, if you will, a response look like to what God is doing?

You'll see in the outline this morning as we look at these sets of verses that first we're going to see one of the first things it does is bring about humility. So, the person who responds to God's gift, in hearing what it looks like to live out this faith will be humble. Second, this person will be determined. Thirdly, this person will be authentic. Humble, determined, and authentic.

What is incredibly beautiful about James is that James is writing well before Paul's letters. And Paul oftentimes has a much more theologically reflective way of writing. James is no less theologically reflective, but in the way in which he writes, the urgency for which he writes, he tends to take that theology and he leans very practical. We're going to see that turn this morning. And the rest of the letter is going to have that flavor to it, that flavor of a very practical way of applying the gospel.

First, we're going to see in these first verses this idea that it produces someone who is humble. Notice what it says in the beginning. It says, "Know this, my beloved brothers," which is a key that he's taking this turn, "let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires." So, he's telling us something about what this humble person actually looks like. This humble person first is a person who hears.

Now, that's a much deeper word in the Greek than it is for us in English. What James means by hearing here is someone who has a deep listening means that they are teachable. It implies that they are taking it in and they're allowing it to take root. It begins to shape them. If you will, in some sense, they're going to allow this to work out in them from the inside out but also from the outside in. You see, the word comes from outside of us and works in us. But sometimes, we grow, and we come every Sunday morning to hear the word, and the word is coming to you outside of you. I'm speaking to you as another person. And so, the question is are you receptive to what God is saying through what He has led me to do in my study and preparation for the sermon? But when we speak to one another, when we pray for one another, even when we confront one another in love, are we receptive to what God might be saying to us through someone else?

So, the humble person is someone who hears. They are listening. They are receptive. The question for us this morning is are we receptive to what God might be saying to us in His word? And we have to be careful, of course, because the test of being receptive is when we have to embrace the blade of criticism.

One of my mentors early on in ministry taught me that you have to learn as a pastor, but he would say, as a Christian to embrace the blade of criticism. He meant that the person coming to you with criticism might have the intentions of hurting you which might tempt you to say, you're trying to hurt me, therefore, I'm not going to listen. The other person might come to you not because they're trying to hurt you, but they're coming to you with a truth that is hard to hear. And so, it draws blood. It comes like a knife. But what my mentor was saying is you embrace the blade before it hits you because what you begin to learn is that learning to hear and to be receptive means I'm willing to put my blood on the floor before I turn on you who's coming at me with criticism.

That is the test. Are we receptive when criticism comes our way? Or do we want to shift it and say, well, you know, you can't say that to me. And it's hard. It is the test. It doesn't mean that the intentions of the person coming at you, even if it is wrong, it doesn't excuse it. But it does tell us something that is deeply biblical. Sometimes, God will speak through donkeys, if you get the drift, to deliver a truth we would not otherwise hear. Are you receptive?

Secondly, closely tied to the first and undergirding the reality of being humble is a person who's peaceable. Now, James describes the opposite. And he says, "let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak," and then he adds this phrase, "slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires."

This "slow to anger," the word being used here in the Greek is "orgis" which means "a kind of wrath." Now, "wrath" in English comes from the old word "wraith" which is also tied to an older word

which is “wreath.” Now, a wreath is what? It’s a circled twist of twigs. So, what do you do to these twigs? You have to twist them and turn them. What happens is we often want to say that the problem is what’s going on is the wrath that appears to us on the outside. But he’s actually talking about something that starts on the inside.

You see, our outward wrath is an indication that we’ve made a lot of little decisions before we’ve reached that conclusion. Outward wrath begins with inward frustration which finds its seed in annoyance. And we want to sort of write it up as emotion. But actually, anger finds its start in the will not in the passions. Our passions, our emotions are a byproduct of our volition, of our will.

And so, what James is talking about is that human wrath twists inside of us, often birthed out of frustration. And that ought to be a warning sign to us that we want control, but we recognize we do not have it. And we want it back. And we will fight for it.

This idea of being peaceable, being slow to anger, I want to be careful in saying he doesn’t say here never angry. The problem is not the presence of anger, which oftentimes gets twisted within the Christian community that somehow one can’t be angry. No, the issue is not anger in and of itself. The issue is what are we doing with our anger. Notice it’s not what we’re feeling with it. What are we doing with it? The presence of anger is not the issue. It’s what we do with it and how we respond. It is deeply connected to the will, which means when we feel anger, are we seeking the peace? And peace isn’t the absence of conflict. It’s actually what we do when we are in it.

You see, wrath unchecked leads to murder or it leads to suicide. On the one hand, wrath can be pointed out towards another. That can ultimately lead to murder or litigation or suing or icing out. But it also can be wrath and anger turned towards yourself that ultimately finds itself in suicide. Both are a breaking of the peace. On the one sense, one is a peace-breaker. The other is a peace-faker. One denies that there’s conflict on the outside, but it wells up within them and they can’t take it anymore, so they must escape it. The other, the peace-breaker, says I can’t take it anymore. I want this control. And so, we fight for it and we lash out in words and in action. And it breaks the peace.

The humble person is a person who recognizes the signs when frustration born out of wanting control but recognizing that we don’t have it is beginning to well up within us. It can be how quickly our heart begins to race. It can be with the clip of our step. It can be with how quickly we turn our heads when somebody’s talking to us. It can be the tone of our voice.

The humble person begins to recognize these triggers, and by God’s grace and the word which is born in us begins to pray and to say, Lord, help me to be self-controlled and to begin asking the question, why am I frustrated? What is the control that I want but I’m not getting? And is there a different path for my anger? The humble person receives the word and allows it to work in them. And then it makes them more self-aware of these triggers. And it is the same word which guides us into being self-controlled.

This is what James is trying to point out. And he will stick in many ways to these two themes and bring them up in different ways throughout his letter. But James is showing us that the word works in us. And sometimes it works from the inside out and other times from the outside in because guess what? Sometimes my emotions are the absolute opposite of how I’m acting. And sometimes I need to act and allow my emotions to catch up with me. And you want to lash out. And you begin praying, Lord, help my emotions to catch up with how I know I ought to be living at peace with those around me.

How are you doing with your anger? Is there someone with whom you need to make peace? Is there somewhere in your heart that the word is not having its work because you want the control?

Not only does it produce a humble person, but it also produces a person who is determined. In verses 22 to 25, James talks about this person who is determined. And he does so by looking at two different people. On the one hand, it’s the person who looks into a mirror - and this is one of the few times that the word “mirror” is used in the Bible - and forgets what they look like. And comparing that

person to the person who looks into the eternal word, and that word begins to have an effect and it changes them.

Let's look at this more closely. But we're going to do it not by looking at it in terms of subpoints, but to ask the question what exactly is James getting at with this simile? What is the comparison that he wants us to see? And perhaps you've heard this passage preached before.

One way we could say is, is James comparing how they see? In the one way, the person is looking into a mirror. Now, a mirror at this time would not be mirrors like we know them, of course. Mirrors were fashioned out of bronze and then they were shined to such a degree to be as reflective as possible. And so, they would look at it. And is it the fact that they're looking at a mirror and then the other person is looking directly at the word? Is it how they're seeing? Is that the case? Because two different words for "seeing" here are used.

But I would argue that I don't believe that's the comparison. It's not what they see that James is comparing where one sees the face and the other sees the word. It's not how they see, one looks through a mirror and the other looks intently at the word. No. The comparison is not what or how they see. The comparison is what happens after they see. The one forgets. The other takes action.

So, why would James make this comparison? It's helpful for us to remember those to whom he is writing. He is writing to a Jewish population. He is writing before Paul. And so, when he refers here to the law, to the word, he's referring most certainly to the law of Moses. He's referring to the Old Testament. And he is looking at something which is a reality. Someone can look into a mirror and forget what they look like, and someone can look at the word and forget what it says. It's not that one is looking at his face and the other at the word. The issue is one forgets and the other remembers.

Why is this an important thing for James? Because it was an important theme throughout the Old Testament. Yes, God is angry at Israel for their disobedience in seeking to worship false gods. But that wasn't their first sin. Their sin was one that they forgot the mercy of God. They forgot His grace that brought them there. They failed to remember His faithfulness, His presence. It was the Lord who brought them up out of slavery in Egypt and gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. It was the Lord who was with them in their suffering. It was the Lord who forgave them. And yet, they forgot. And they continued to forget.

And so, James is saying here it is not what or how we see. It's what we do when we look at the word. Do we respond to it with action? A person who seeks to apply the word of truth, to allow it to work from the inside out, and yes, sometimes from the outside in is a person who is asking where, for example, does this passage need to speak to my character or to my decision making or to my relationships now? Where do I need to take action? Where am I not listening? The person who is determined is a person who hears it and says, Holy Spirit, have mercy on me, a sinner. But have your way with me. Help me to live and to respond as one who is determined to rely on you. This is just a working out of the first point which is humility.

But James ultimately leads not just to the humble person or the determined person but the authentic person. In these final verses 26-27, he brings up this problem. He says, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless," showing very possibly that we could sit here for decades, you could even be a communing member of this church and have picked up the lingo but not really know who Jesus is.

How then do we begin to respond to that problem that we might be religious but far from Him? James brings up these things, and it's what I'm calling the word as it begins to bring life, it builds into us authenticity. What do I mean by authenticity? It is that there is an integrity, a soundness to the character of who we are in the whole of our life. What is true and happens on Sunday morning and the way we are with one another here is the same way we are with others who are not a part of this community. Or

we're the same here as we are at home or we are at work or we are in the neighborhood. Is there a soundness?

Well, he gives us several ways to get at this authenticity. He says, of course, it's the issue of the tongue. And James will go into even further depth in chapter 3. Are you self-controlled with regard to how you use your tongue? Because if you're unable to, by God's grace, speak the truth in love and be gracious and encouraging and thoughtful and supportive in other parts of your life with your tongue, that needs to be a sincere question mark to ask the question, how then can we sing such songs and confess such prayers and yet what flows from our mouth to others is not blessing but anger, condescension, arrogance, and tearing others apart?

If we lack self-control with our tongues in the other parts of our life, I would tell all of us as I would want you to tell me, I need to call my religion into serious question. I'm not suggesting, however, that we can't falter or we don't say sinful things and hurtful things because we do. I do. You do. The question is what do we do in response to it? This goes back to the whole issue of being peaceful. Do we seek to reconcile and to ask for forgiveness?

But if we are not doing that, how about when we're saying, well, I'm just being honest. This is what I would call the shallow view of authenticity, transparency. You see, we seem to think now that as long as I'm being honest on the rage machine that is Twitter, well that's no problem. I'm just being honest. Well, honesty is a thin virtue as someone once said. You can be honest, and you can be an incredibly hurtful person. Yeah, you can be transparent. You can let all kinds of people know what's going on in your life. And you can be as condescending and arrogant as anyone else.

So, the goal is not authenticity as a shallow sense of just being honest or transparent. No. The question is, is what flows from our mouth which comes from our heart, and if the word is having its work there that when the words come out here that hurt and tear apart, does the word also have its work where we seek to go back and ask for forgiveness? And if it's not, then we need to ask what is the soundness of our religion?

Not only about self-control of the tongue but also merciful. Now, he uses this phrase here, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction." He doesn't mean to sum up all of what is pure religion. But I would argue it's a part of a person who is receptive to the word is a person who is humble and teachable, a person who recognizes their ability to be angry, and to realize the frustration is a person who is allowing the word to be at work. And you begin to see that we are needy people, every one of us. And if we begin to see our need before a holy and gracious God, then we begin to see the needs of others.

And so, increasingly as the Lord has His work in us by His word, we begin to see the other perhaps that others do not see. And we seek to do justly, and to love mercy, and to provide for others. And many of you are already doing this. It can look like a whole host of things. It's things we can do corporately. It's things that we can do individually. But we seek to love mercy as we seek to care for those who are widows and orphans who are really an example of a whole host of people who don't get the attention of the world around us such as the prisoner, the refugee, the immigrant. How can we love others in their need?

But finally, this third part which he talks about in being an authentic person, he ends with this. James says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." Now, what does he mean there? First, I think what he means is an authentic person who is walking in faith, the authentic Christian is a Christian who is shrewd. You see, the idea of world here doesn't mean that we somehow take the posture that the world is all bad and we must keep ourselves from it, that our posture towards the world is one of being against it. Or another equal response could be that the world is the problem, and I will seek to separate myself from it. No. If it's possible for me to be stained by your coffee spilling on the

table, it means I was sitting there with you. So, if the concern here is to be untainted, unstained by the world, it means I have to be close enough to it for that to be tested.

I think what he's talking about is not the world in its existence. It is all of the ideas, the philosophies that set themselves up against who God is and who He says He is in His word and who Jesus Christ is as savior. And I'm aware of the counter-narratives that the world offers for life and for death, for salvation, or redemption, or forgiveness, or grace. I'm aware of the narrative that the world is trying to spin through music, through art, through film, whatever the case may be. And as a Christian changed by the word, we seek to move out into it aware of that narrative. But shrewdly in our understanding of that narrative, we seek to live out the gospel and not falling prey to that narrative but offering graciously, humbly, and with words and action to live out the gospel narrative.

And one key area, ladies and gentlemen, that I am most concerned about in the United States of America is not our next election. I am concerned about what feels to me like a tension that is in our culture, a tension that feels ready to be offended, ready to lash out, building up of fearmongering about the other whoever the other might be. And I'm concerned about the absence in the midst of all of that anger, in the midst of all of that rage is a whole new kind of puritanism that lacks all and every ounce of forgiveness. We have lost the ability to learn how to offend one another even though we might be doing it honestly, we might be saying something that is provoking. And yet, we've lost the ability to forgive. And that if you offend me, it's over. And if we think that's outside in the world, I got some Christian neighborhoods you can go pursue. It's called Facebook. It's called Twitter. It's called the blogosphere.

Christians are ripping each other as if somehow God died and made us God and that we sit in judgement on one another. And we have all our little litmus tests. And I will tell you that when we fail to live in forgiveness and humility with one another, how then can we expect the world to listen to the gospel of grace?

The world and its narrative will begin to feed on itself. It will become a new law, a new puritanism that does not forgive. It only excludes. And you cannot speak. And therefore, we will break open into some kind of - and I hope not - cultural revolution that may have dire effects. And if that's what happens, the church cannot join the world in that.

But we must, by God's grace, understand that narrative. But being ones who are born of another narrative altogether, a narrative of the word, a narrative of who Jesus Christ is who birthed us into salvation and has given us an implanted word, that word begins to change us from the inside out. And we respond to the world and we respond to others including the other that you're thinking of right now who you cannot stand, who had better not provoke you, that other who you can move towards them in forgiveness and humility.

If we cannot do that, the gospel will not go forth in a flourishing way. It must begin with us. It must begin in the heart of the believer. It must begin with the word, the gift of God. And all good gifts come from the Father of lights who has birthed us through this word, has given us the implanted word, and calls us by His Spirit to work out our faith as a humble, as a determined, and as an authentic people. May God do that in us. Thank you for your patience. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for your word. I thank you for the reality that we need this word. We need you to work in us the ability to receive it as a gift and to respond to it because this word is giving birth. And Lord, we need the ability to move towards one another in greater degrees of humility and forgiveness, to give the gift of love as it has been given to us, and to live it out in a determined and an authentic way. Lord, this is hard. It is hard being a Christian because it's hard being a person. And frankly, we are tired. We're tired of being tired. We need you to work in us because we can't depend on ourselves. We can't begin with trusting each other. We must begin by trusting you, the giver of good gifts. So, may you work this out in us to make us a people for your name and for your glory that the gospel may go forth. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.